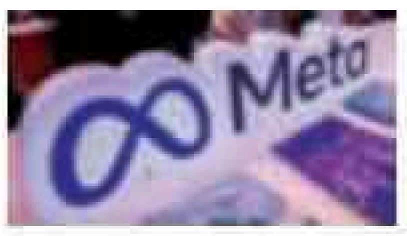

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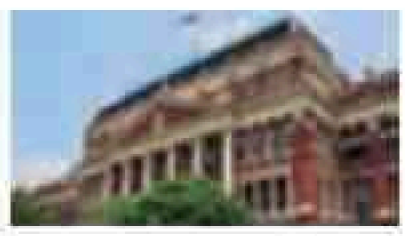

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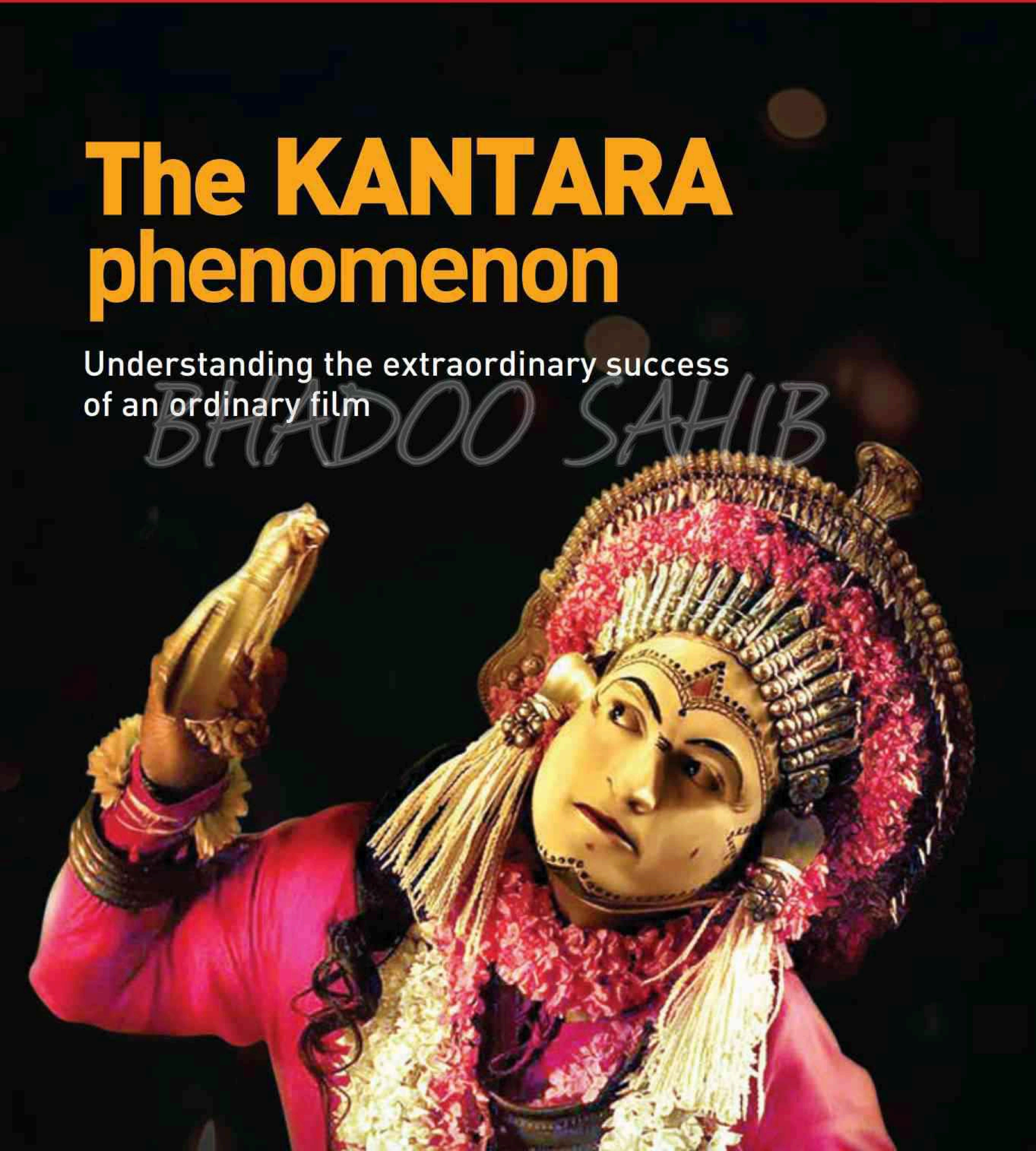

The KANTARA phenomenon

Understanding the extraordinary success of an ordinary film

VISIT…

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FRONTLINE

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The Congress

FRONTLINE
REIMAGINING INDIA

THE article "Reinventing the Congress" (Cover Story, November 18) was an incisive analysis of the existential crisis the Indian National Congress is facing. There is an urgent need for the development of the Congress because a pan-India party is required to counter the divisive agenda of the BJP.

The top brass of the Congress had a diminished connect with the masses and thus was blindfolded to the ground realities. This led to its fielding outsiders in contests. Lack of unity further hurt the party's prospects. But the change in the party's leadership and Rahul Gandhi's stand against the anti-people and sectarian approaches of the BJP may have given the party a fresh start in the minds of people.

The AAP does not have a national presence, and its leadership plays truant at critical moments and issues. Regional satraps change their alliances to suit their personal concerns. This situation forces people to look for an alternative. The Congress must efficiently manage its intra-party affairs and evaluate its performance from top to bottom.

B. RAJSEKARAN
BENGALURU

THE Congress has for some time been viewed as a spent force as it lost one Assembly election after another and suffered from internal crises, with leaders either leaving for greener pastures or openly opposing the party leadership. With the election of Mallikarjun Kharge as party president, the Congress has entered a new phase, which one hopes will bring about a welcome change to the party and attract more people to it.

Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Yatra, which he has embarked on to connect with and unite people irrespective of their background or ideology, should be used to create awareness among people about the many serious issues facing the country such as hatred, oppression, the rhetoric of divisiveness, price rise, curbs on free speech, poverty, hunger, and unemployment, to name a few.

The new Congress president needs to focus on these issues, which the BJP does not give adequate importance to.

M.Y. SHARIFF
CHENNAI

THE enthusiasm in the media for the Bharat Jodo Yatra is not shared by common people ("One step at a time", November 18). While Rahul Gandhi was walking through Telangana and the Congress was speaking of the grand success of the yatra, the party's candidate lost her deposit in the byelection held in that State. It was a seat the Congress held, and the lost deposit bears testimony to its declining strength in the southern States.

The party took the decision to divide Andhra Pradesh for political gain and got decimated in the residual Andhra Pradesh and is yielding space to the BJP as the main opposition in Telangana.

If the Congress fails to regain power in Karnataka in 2023, then it may have to give up south India. With the pre-election surveys from Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh not so encouraging for the Congress, where is the revival of the party through the yatra? No amount of boosting from party intellectuals and the media is going to give the Congress fresh life as its weaknesses are congenital.

DUGGARAJU SRINIVASA RAO
VIJAYAWADA, ANDHRA PRADESH

MALLIKARJUN KHARGE was elected with the tacit support of the Gandhi family ("Agent of change?", November 18). The other contender, Shashi Tharoor, said that there was need for change in the party. In this context, Kharge has said that 50 per cent of the party's organisational posts should be held by people under the age of 50.

Although, the Congress is in limbo, one should not forget that it is the largest opposition party in the country. Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Yatra has been received well and may be a game-changer for the Congress.

S. MURALI
VELLORE, TAMIL NADU

Hijab ban

HIJAB IS OUR CULTURAL
HIJAB IS OUR
SAVE CONSTITUTION
WE COVER OUR HEADS NOT OUR BRAINS

THE satire "The case of the hijab" (November 18) was interesting and made plausible points about why the hijab was targeted. It is true, as the article says, that education boards would do well to focus on what goes into the heads of students rather than on what is on them.

The fact is that the State government or ruling party is targeting people of a specific religion by imposing a ban on cattle slaughter, launching a campaign against halal meat, and so on. Instead, the government should take immediate action to stop malicious trolls and work to brighten the future of students.

SHAIKH HUSAIN
MUMBAI

Assembly elections

WHILE the Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh Assembly elections will be a litmus test for the BJP governments in those States, what is at stake for the Congress, whose electoral fortunes have continued

to nosedive election after election, is its very existence ("Two icons and tall promises", November 18).

With the AAP also in the fray, the scenario is intriguing in both States, but especially so in Gujarat. The lack of an effective State leadership and the required organisational set-up has been the greatest disadvantage for the Congress in Gujarat. The desertion of several party leaders and supporters has only added insult to injury.

Although Arvind Kejriwal has presented voters with a third alternative and made steady inroads into both States, the personal charisma of Prime Minister Narendra Modi could strike an emotional chord with voters and tilt the balance in the BJP's favour. While the BJP will find it tough to overcome anti-incumbency in Himachal Pradesh, its well-oiled election machinery and clear-cut campaign strategy could propel it to power once again in Gujarat.

B. SURESH KUMAR
COIMBATORE, TAMIL NADU

Forest areas

ANY educated person can easily understand that forests play a big role in influencing rainfall ("No jungles out there", November 18).

A forest area catching fire is a serious issue. Factors such as climate change, deforestation, and dry weather add to the chances of a wildfire. It is time for us to protect our forest areas. Otherwise, there will be serious consequences.

P. SENTHIL SARAVANA DURAI
MUMBAI

Caste

CASTE is a form of class into which one is born and from which it is very difficult to escape, and it has become part and parcel of the Indian psyche ("Karnataka's shame", November 4). Every political party must have an anti-caste cell to prevent the horrible practice of caste-based violence and turning Dalits into scapegoats for no fault of theirs. Other things that should be done are promoting inter-caste, inter-religious, international, and interracial marriages and starting an intra-national students' exchange scheme where students of one religion and community stay with a family of another community and religion.

PETER CASTELLINO
MUMBAI

Bilkis Bano

IT is shocking that all the 11 convicts involved in the gang rape of Bilkis Bano and the murder of members of her family, including her 3-year-old daughter, were set free without the trauma of the innocent victims being taken into consideration ("Justice for Bilkis", September 23).

The so-called remission policy under which they were set free is not for such criminals, who are not entitled to any mercy. While the victim and her family were able to get on with their lives when the accused remained behind bars, now they have to live in fear again. Now that the victim has filed a petition in the Supreme Court, the Gujarat government should provide the victim's family with protection and ensure that all the released accused surrender.

ASHOK NIHALANI
PUNE, MAHARASHTRA

ANNOUNCEMENT

Letters, whether by surface mail or e-mail, must carry the full postal address and the full name, or the name with initials.

Editor's note

SOMETIMES a pop culture phenomenon occurs that hints at shifting sociopolitical trends. *Kantara* is such a phenomenon. Yet, for all the hype, *Kantara* disappoints. It is not imaginative enough to forsake the masala formula, merely grafting the Bhoota Kola on to a tenuous storyline. It is emotionally crude, construing loudness for intensity, and it is ideologically anaemic.

I found it particularly curious how the film quickly absolved the state of wrongdoing and reinstated the landlord as villain; yet anyone who has worked closely with forest communities will know how much state and landlord work in tandem. But Rishab Shetty is not interested in that; he is wholly absorbed by the spectacular and the godly. His triumph is the creation of the Panjurli deity, whom he depicts movingly as endowed with powerful splendour but also with endless compassion.

It is wholly apposite that the film is, therefore, a spectacular success. For a populace drunk on neoliberal libations, what can be more convenient than a film that says the law can sit back because god will rescue the underprivileged.

The appeal of the mythical is eternal, particularly in India, particularly now, when the lines between myth and history, culture and religion are fading. At such times, custom and ritual become substitutes for real piety, which demands sacrifice and empathy unlike hyper-religiosity.

Understanding *Kantara* is thus also about decoding the film as a symptom of our times. A fine set of writers undertakes that task in this issue of *Frontline*.

Elsewhere in the magazine, Peter deSouza, Ganesh Devy, Gopalkrishna Gandhi, Tabish Khair, Justice K. Chandru, Kalpana Sharma, and former *Frontline* editor N. Ram write some excellent pieces this fortnight. Dig in!

Vaishna Roy

COVER STORY

Sacred games

Embraced fiercely by conservatives for its ritual elements while dismissed by its detractors as regressive, *Kantara* has proved to be more interesting because of the culture wars it has initiated rather than as an aesthetic object in itself.

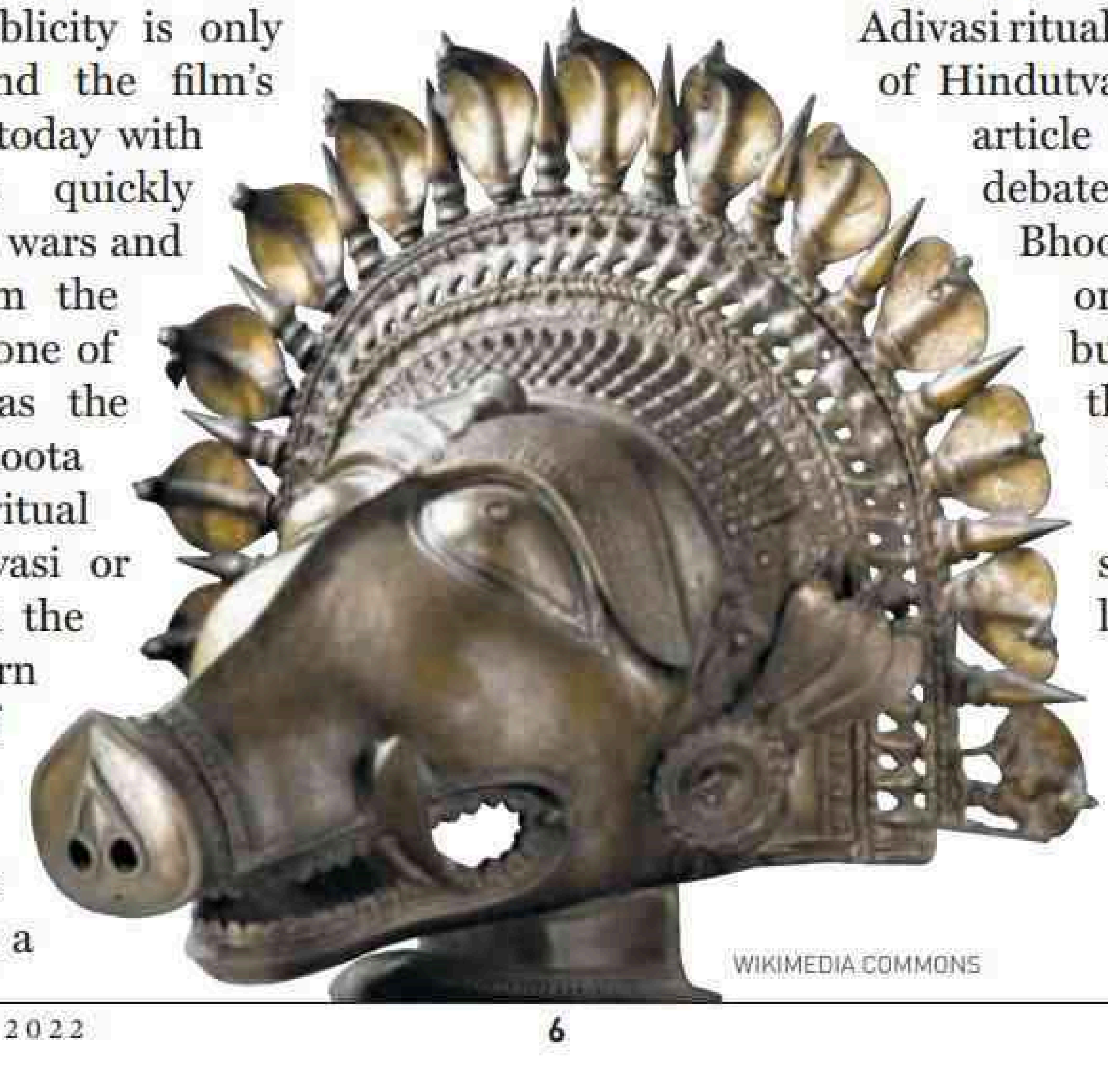
BY **SRIKANTH SRINIVASAN**

RISHAB SHETTY'S ACTION DRAMA *KANTARA* has turned out to be quite the sleeper hit. Released on September 30, 2022, the Kannada film gained in popularity over the first week of its run, prompting the filmmakers to distribute it in several other languages. At the end of a month, *Kantara* had become the most profitable Kannada-language film of all time, with the exception of *K.G.F: Chapter 2*, which set the box office on fire earlier this year. That this astonishing success was made possible by word-of-mouth publicity is reassuring in an era of colossal marketing budgets, and it is also oddly appropriate for a work that foregrounds oral modes of knowledge transmission.

But word-of-mouth publicity is only part of the reason behind the film's reputation. Like any work today with high visibility, *Kantara* quickly became an object of culture wars and significantly benefited from the ensuing controversy. The bone of contention, specifically, was the film's emphatic use of the Bhoota Kola, a performative ritual prevalent among the Adivasi or indigenous communities in the coastal region of southern Karnataka. In this form of invocation, a designated medium, in expressive makeup and elaborate costume, works himself into a trance, channelling a guardian spirit, which addresses the concerns of the community.

Champions of *Kantara* on the right of the political spectrum have seen in Shetty's film—and its nationwide acceptance—the expression of a pan-Indian Hindu identity, a native metaphysics that allows Hindu audiences across the country to connect with the themes of the story despite its cultural specificity. Critics fault the film precisely for this conflation of indigenous practices with Hindu mythology. In particular, Shetty's overlaying of Bhoota Kola performances with the Sanskrit hymn "Varaha Roopam", whose lines invoke the third avatar of Vishnu, has been seen as an "appropriation" of Adivasi rituals by the homogenising forces of Hindutva. It is not the goal of the article to pass judgement on the debate—to determine whether Bhoota Kola is part of Hinduism or not—but to retrieve a work buried, within weeks, under the debilitating debris of political discourse.

Kantara carries the subtitle "a legend" and opens like a fable. An off-screen narrator tells the tale of a king who, in the mid-19th



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

THE BOAR mask that makes the dancer's headpiece in the Panjurli Bhoota.

A STILL from *Kantara.*

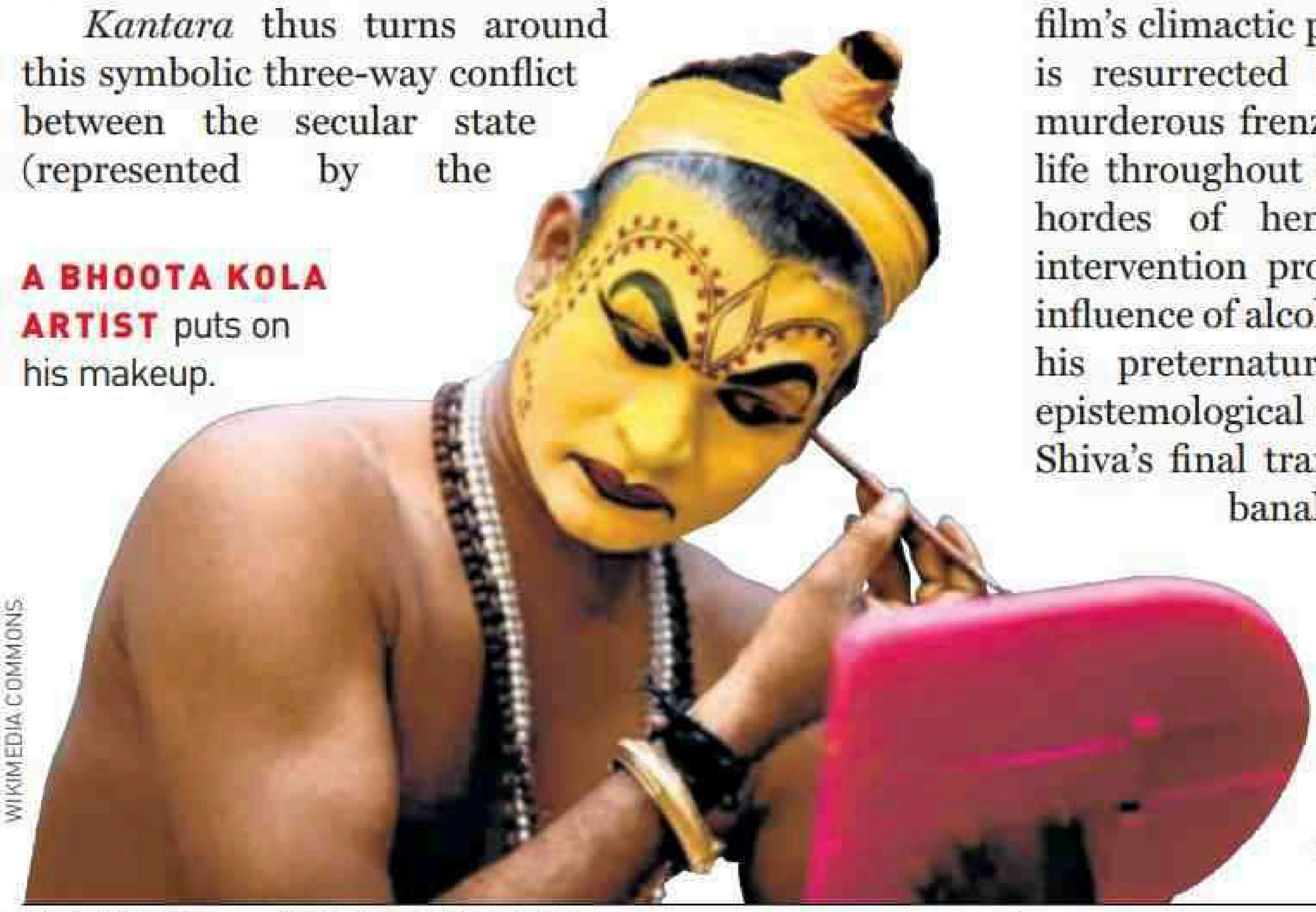
BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

> *Kantara* inherits from the last wave of "mythologicals", the beloved *Amman/Ammoru* films of the 1990s and the early 2000s that flourished and faded with India's economic liberalisation.

century, trades off vast stretches of his wooded demesne for obtaining the protection of a tribal deity. It is a pact not just between the raja and the forest-dwelling tribe who worship the deity, but with the deity itself, who speaks through one of the tribesmen, warning against violating the covenant. We see the dire consequences of such a transgression soon enough; a contemptuous descendant of the king challenges divine law by mocking a Bhoota Kola performer and dies when he tries to retrieve the gifted land through legal means.

This supernatural prelude, which concludes with the withdrawal of "god" from the world, frames a largely secular story set in the 1990s. The king's next-generation descendant is now a landlord by the name Devendra Suttur (played by Achyuth Kumar), who lives in guarded harmony with the tribe while profiting from the produce of their land. A hired hand at Suttur's timber factory, Shiva (Shetty himself), comes from a family entrusted with the hallowed Bhoota Kola ritual, but lives a profane life dominated by liquor and boar hunting. His provocative ways run up against Murali (Kishore), a newly appointed forest officer who wants to stop Shiva's poaching, nationalise the forest lands where the tribal community lives and whose resources it uses, and relocate its inhabitants.

Kantara thus turns around this symbolic three-way conflict between the secular state (represented by the unbelieving forest officer), the faithful majority (the descendants of the tribe), and the transitional remnant of the old order (the extractive landlord who nonetheless abides by community rules). Each of these forces comes with its own perception of the land; if the officer is armed with the objectivity of maps and the landlord with acreage information, the villagers have a more empirical, corporeal relation to their dwelling place. The expanse of land gifted to them in the prelude is determined simply by the reaches of a primal scream that the deity emits and which becomes a recurring formal element in the film.



A BHOOTA KOLA ARTIST puts on his makeup.

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

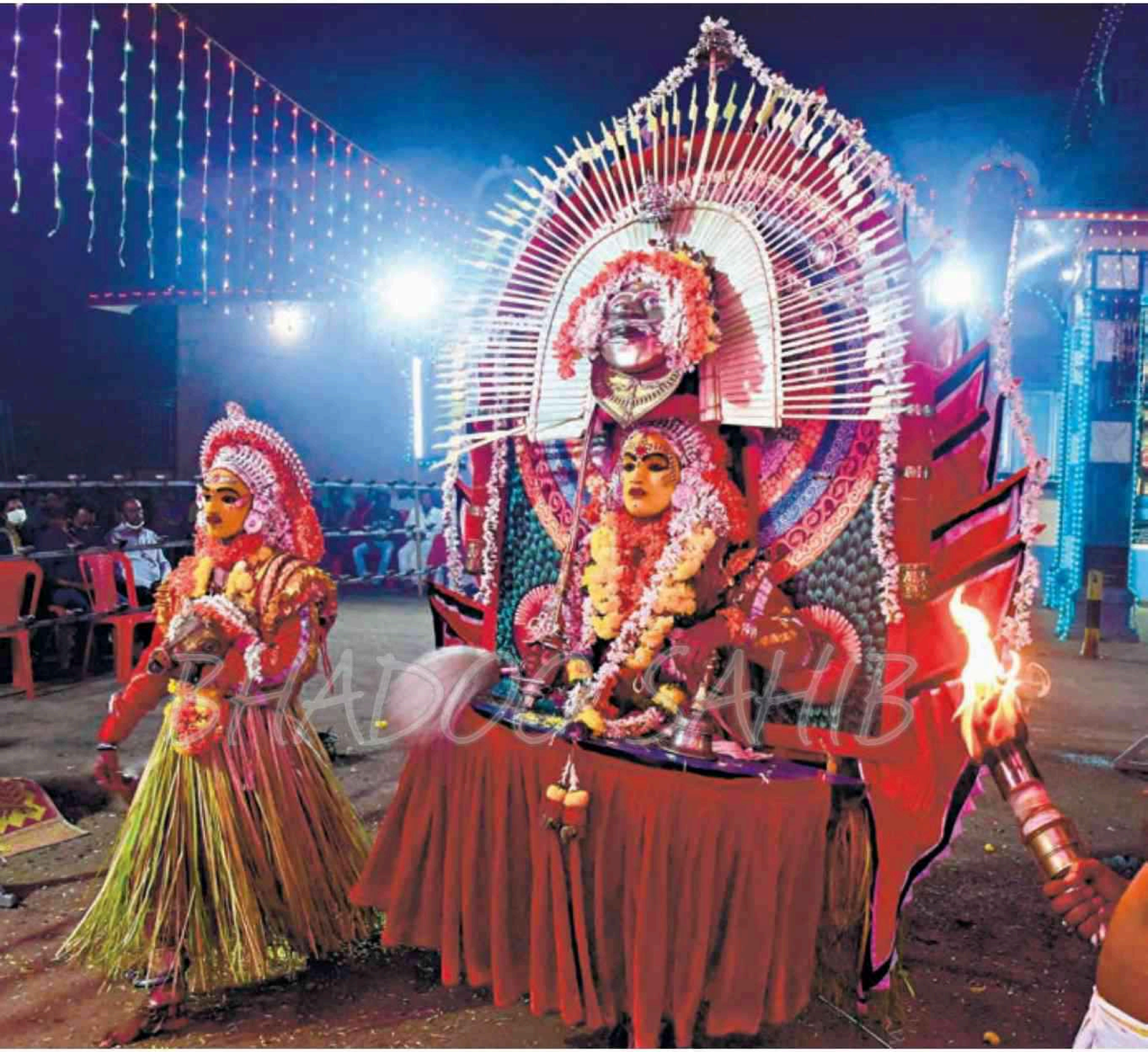
But subtextual analysis will only take us so far. Shetty is not an intellectual or an ideologue. To treat *Kantara* as the expression of a comprehensive world view is to mischaracterise the work, which relies significantly on narrative convention and melodramatic abstraction for effect. For most of its runtime, the film chugs along on lines familiar to the Indian audience, recounting the story of a lovable rural rascal who finds his cause. Secondary characters are defined by a single trait—the intransigent forest officer, the crafty landlord—with no dialectical streak to soften them. When they are not romantic props, women are either absent (the officer's deserting wife), mute (the landlord's silently suffering spouse), or reduced to a neurotic wreck (Shiva's mother).

Such simplifications come with the territory, and for a film unfolding like a myth, they are defensible. *Kantara*'s shortcomings, on the other hand, are dramaturgical and stylistic. With character motivations weakly sketched, the film progresses through a series of coarse contrivances to arrive at its conflict and resolution, especially around the figure of the forest officer. This lack of dramatic cogency is aggravated by a restless style of rapid edits and strident score that does not allow the film to linger on a moment or an image. Whether portraying the forest officer, or the landlord's lawyer, or Shiva's friends, almost every actor operates on a uniformly ultra-high pitch, constraining the film to an unvarying emotional profile.

This agitated, exaggerated style undermines the film's climactic passage, when a done-and-dusted Shiva is resurrected by the deity and animated into a murderous frenzy. Because Shiva has been larger than life throughout the narrative, capable of taking down hordes of henchmen single-handedly, this godly intervention proves moot, scarcely different from the influence of alcohol or cannabis that so far gave our hero his preternatural fighting abilities. Instead of an epistemological shift in our perception, what we get in Shiva's final transition is a literal *deus ex machina*, a banalisation of the divine.

SUSPENDING DISBELIEF

Notwithstanding the novelty ascribed to this heavenly visitation, Indian audiences are not alien to such irruptions of the irrational in their cinema, where stories of rewarded



BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

SRI MALARAYA DHOOMAVATHI NEMA, a form of Bhoota Kola, being performed at Urwa Sri Mariyamma temple in Mangaluru in 2021 as part of an annual festival.

devotion held sway at one point in time. *Kantara*, in fact, inherits from the last wave of these "mythologicals", the beloved *Amman/Ammoru* films of the 1990s and the early 2000s that flourished and faded with India's economic liberalisation. Where these movies put their pious protagonists through trials by domestic injustice, *Kantara* takes its agnostic hero through a worldly tale of social injustice. The viewer has, even so, no trouble suspending disbelief and never doubts for a moment that a man could really die vomiting blood as punishment for defying the gods.

Yet something does transform in *Kantara*'s quarter-hour home stretch. As Shiva's battered body is visited by the deity, speech, psychology, and plot recede to make way for the pure spectacle of a manic performance. Bare-chested and ash-faced, Shetty takes a leap into the void, carried away in religious transport. He crawls, jiggles, rolls, and dances, his limbs splayed in all directions, tongue out, head thrown back in convulsions. Words yield to full-throated howls as he taunts his adversaries, breaks their bones, and converts their lethal torches into ceremonial *aarti*. At one point, he gorges on

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

STILLS FROM *KANTARA*, (above and facing page) and (below) a poster.

puffed rice offered in pacification. In the midst of this vortex of gestures, this sublime silliness, the audience is suspended in a mixture of fright, admiration, and nervous laughter.

At the peak of this sacred rage, Shetty cuts to a tender scene of peace and reconciliation. Having at last owned up to his heritage, Shiva now performs the Bhoota Kola ritual, his individuality wholly subsumed by the role. Scored to the "Varaha Roopam" hymn, and shot seductively in slow motion, this moving coda finds a fully costumed Shiva directing a series of gestures at the forest officer, gestures that are defiant, authoritative, affectionate, trustful, and submissive all at once. He draws the officer's hand to his chest, inviting other onlookers to follow suit and uniting them into a single mass around him. As he leans back, the swirl of emotions on his face gives way to serenity, like a rogue tune that has finally found its home note. Shortly after, he withdraws into the forest upon hearing the call of his forebear, and when he does meet him, the serenity blossoms into joy. Shiva, who has always been running away from this call, and his calling, heeds to it at long last. The circle closes.

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

It's a potent sequence that tugs at the traditionalist fibre in the viewer.

Little wonder, then, that conservatives have embraced the film with vehemence and turned it into an emblem, one more mallet with which to bash Bollywood, which to their eyes has lost connection with the customs of the land. The formal risk of the ending should not be understated. For nearly all of its last 10 minutes, *Kantara* suspends all exposition to surrender to its lead actor's unexplained, idiolectic gestural work. The scene's success is that, despite its relative abstraction, it has made the audience go into raptures.

ROOTED CHARM

Even so, very little in the film supports or leads up to this powerful closing episode. The Bhoota Kola ritual, which opens and closes the film, is employed for its spectacular and dramatic potential, its exotic value played up in symmetric framing and a beguiling soundtrack. Whether or not Bhoota Kola was assimilated "upwards" into mainstream Hinduism by the Sanskrit verse of "Varaha Roopam," the verse and the Carnatic tune themselves have been upsold, rendered cool in a heavy metal garb palatable to deracinated ears.

On the other hand, critics and commentators have connected *Kantara*'s triumph to its "rooted" storytelling, one that is bound to a particular place, its culture, and its people. In interviews, Shetty has expressed that his desire was to depict and celebrate his native region of Tulunadu in southern Karnataka. To this end, he saturates his film with sights and sounds from the area, including his hometown of Keradi in Udupi district, all of it enhanced in post-production. Shetty's introduction scene has him participating in the famed Kambala race. We see

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

> The film's forceful marriage of mainstream moviemaking tropes and vivid mythical elements plays a key role in cementing its reputation.

impressionistic glimpses from village fairs, men in *banyans* and *lungis* engaging in cockfights, imbibing toddy served in frond cups, downing chicken sukka, wearing *kadas*, wielding licensed rifles, hunting boars, and cursing generously in local dialect.

This recourse to local colour is not new in South Indian cinema. The Tamil film industry, for instance, is still reeling from the "neo-native" wave of rural, Madurai-centred movies that emerged in the mid-2000s with blockbusters like *Paruthiveeran* (2007) and *Subramaniapuram* (2008). The continued commercial success of these films, particularly in metropolitan areas, suggests that their geographical specificity, far from being deterrent to enjoyment or "relatability", has perhaps a special appeal to urban viewers displaced from their native habitat through economic migration.

Cultural anchoring, however, is neither necessary nor sufficient for a film to be accepted by the wider public. Neither has, say, Bhojpuri cinema captivated South India in any significant way, nor has the fuzzy universalism of Hollywood's superhero movies come in the way of its worldwide adoration. Deciphering a film's success is ultimately a fool's errand, doomed to yield only glib generalisations, since the canonisation of any given work is the result of a long, sedimentary process determined by a multitude of interrelated factors, sociological, industrial, political, technological, and above all aesthetic.

To be sure, *Kantara*'s forceful marriage of mainstream moviemaking tropes and vivid mythical elements plays an important role in cementing its reputation. But the fulgurant popularity of recent south Indian films, including Shetty's, cannot be explained without taking into account the domestication of mainstream south Indian cinema through years of dubbed television broadcast in the north, the country's telecom boom that turned every smartphone user into a precise target of digital marketing, the concomitant dissolution of the "family audience" into ephemeral interest groups, and often the culture wars that turn these works into ideological footballs to be possessed and kicked around. In this sense and others, rather than as an aesthetic object in itself, *Kantara* proves more interesting as a symptom of our times. □

Srikanth Srinivasan is a Bengaluru-based film critic and translator.

‘I believe in the practice

Interview with Rishab Shetty, director of *Kantara*. BY **VIKHAR AHMED SAYEED**

RISHAB SHETTY, THE DIRECTOR AND writer of *Kantara*, spoke to *Frontline* on the runaway success of his film, the culture of coastal Karnataka, and allegations that the film appropriates aspects of local culture as part of Brahminical Hinduism. Excerpts:

***Kantara*'s success has perhaps exceeded even your wildest expectations. Why do you think the film clicked with the audience?**

As a writer, I had certain ideas as to what should be the takeaway of the film and I have always believed that the “‘regional is universal”,’ so I made the film from a regional perspective.

How did you come up with the story of *Kantara*?

Around 20 or 30 years ago, an incident took place in my village which helped me begin writing *Kantara*. This incident involved a fracas between a forest officer and a farmer over a piece of agricultural land. When I recalled the incident, I didn’t see these two persons as mere individuals but as representatives of humanity and nature, their clash representing this conflict. I started thinking about this and about how our entire culture in coastal Karnataka revolves around agriculture. Linked to this agriculture-based culture are the *daivas* (local deities), who are an intrinsic part of our lives, which I brought into my story to complete the tale of the conflict between the elements of nature and humanity. According to me, *daiva aradhane* (worship of local deities) bridges this conflict.

Daiva aradhane brings together everyone equally in its rituals. Even to this day, when *daivas* are worshipped, members of a particular village, along with their families who may be scattered across the world, ensure that they gather for the rituals. There is no caste element in the *Kola* (the ritual dance which is part of *daiva aradhane*) and it even transcends religion, as there are Muslim and Christian *daivas*. That’s why I have included the character of Garnall Abbu in the film who is a Beary Muslim (a Muslim community from coastal Karnataka). Thus, I brought in the idea of coexistence as demonstrated in *daiva aradhane*.

The subtitle of the film is *Ondu Danta Kathe* (a legend). Is the film actually based on a legend of coastal Karnataka?

Not directly, but we have thousands of *daivas* in coastal Karnataka, each of whom has a story. All these stories have come to us as folk songs. There are many sagas where the *daiva* is challenged, or the *daiva* performs miracles, and these have actually been witnessed by people who have recorded these instances. How does a story become a legend? Generations of storytellers repeat the same story, giving birth to a legend. I brought together many real incidents, legends, and bits of folklore that I’ve heard over the years and set my fictional story in the world of *Kantara*.

You have effectively portrayed the culture of coastal Karnataka through the *kambala* (buffalo race), *kola*, *daiva aradhane* and the Kundapur dialect of Kannada.

This is something a lot of filmmakers do. A filmmaker may belong to north or south or coastal Karnataka but the film becomes a strong film if they incorporate the legends, folklore and ideas of their regions. It is also our responsibility as filmmakers to not only provide entertainment but also,

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

and I have portrayed it’

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

"THE FRENZIED MOMENT": A still from *Kantara*.

in some way, to document aspects of our culture for the viewers. There are famous Kannada litterateurs such as Shivaram Karanth and Kuvempu who have set novels in their regions. When it comes to filmmakers today, there is a natural apprehension whether films set in a regional milieu will work or not, but when the story is packaged in an interesting way the audience will engage with it.

The climactic scene has become the most popular segment, with many viewers awed by the way in which it is conceptualised. How did you come up with this scene?

It is difficult to answer your question because it’s not easy to communicate what I experienced during the shooting of this scene. In the screenplay, there was only one line about this scene, which stated that the spirit of *Guliga daiva* would enter Shiva on the instruction of *Panjurli daiva*. When the *daiva*’s spirit enters a person, that person struggles to withstand the energy and loses consciousness sometimes. I had to portray this frenzied moment and I prepared for this by watching thousands of videos of *Guliga daiva* on YouTube. I had also seen the *kola* from my childhood, and a team of *daiva nartakas* (ritual dancers) was with me throughout and I was discussing the portrayal with them continuously. As a devotee myself, I was clear that the portrayal should be accurate because these are sensitive matters of belief, and the visuals of the scene played out in my head.

The Karnataka government announced that it would provide Rs.2,000 as pension to *daiva aradhane* artistes. You must be happy with this decision.

Yes, I’m very happy with this decision but I would further request the Karnataka government to provide similar pensions to other practitioners of folk arts in the State. After I made my previous movie *Sarkaari Hiriya Praathamika Shaale, Kaasaragodu, Koduge: Raamanna Rai* (2018) on Kannada schools and language politics, a lot of people adopted Kannada schools. Nowadays, there is a feeling that cinema does not have any tangible impact but as these instances show, cinema does have the power to change people’s lives.

***Kantara* has become the second-highest grossing Kannada film. This year has been especially good for the industry, with superhits such as *KGF 2*, *James*, *Vikrant Rona*, and *777 Charlie*. What does this mean for Kannada cinema?**

We are passing through an important phase in the journey of Kannada cinema right now. When we look at the history of Kannada cinema, we see that it has played an important role in the cinematic history of India. We have had legendary actors such as Dr Rajkumar, Ambareesh, Shankar Nag, Lokesh, and Ananth Nag, and directors such as S. Siddalingaiah and Puttanna Kanagal.

Have you seen the 1970s film *Bhootayyana Maga Ayyu* directed by Siddalingaiah? It was a film that was far ahead of its time, both technically and in the way it discussed issues like caste. Then there was *Ondu Muttina Kathe* which starred Dr Rajkumar and had scenes shot underwater. Kannada cinema pioneered many technological innovations in India. Web series are popular now, but *Malgudi Days* was the first on Indian television.

Every industry has its ups and downs, and Kannada cinema has seen these phases, but we are living in an era where language barriers are breaking down and the distinctions between regional cinema and Bollywood are disappearing. For the audience now, which is very perceptive, there is only Indian cinema, and quality of content ensures that a variety of films are accepted.

You have made it clear that you will direct and act in only Kannada movies. With the massive success of *Kantara*, you must be highly sought after by Bollywood and other language cinemas, so why this insistence?

Definitely. I will make only Kannada films. *Kantara* has been appreciated and the film has been dubbed into several languages; this has given me a lot of confidence. If the approach I had towards cinema while making

Kantara changes, my art will become corrupted, won't it? I want to continue making films the same way. For *Kantara* to be a global superhit, the stage was provided by Kannada cinema and Kannadigas. I owe it to Kannadigas who watched the film and reviewed it on social media, after which the accolades spread like a forest fire. How can I forget that?

After the release of the film, there were comments that *daiva aradhane* is not part of Vedic Hindu culture as shown in the film. There is also the critique that while local rituals are integral to small communities, when transposed onto a larger frame, as in your film, they can be co-opted into a national project like political Hindutva. How do you counter the charge that 'daiva kola' is not part of Hindu dharma, as claimed by the right wing, but a non-Brahminical practice?

Ideally, it is not me but the *daiva nartakas*, who have been performing these rituals for generations, who should respond to this question, as it pertains to their practices. I'm merely the storyteller. I have portrayed this [cultural practice] on screen without harming anyone's sentiments. Just as critics have a right to question, I, too, have the right to bring in whatever aspects I want to in my film. The freedom of expression of the storyteller is also important, isn't it? I have said what I had to say through my film.

> It is our responsibility as filmmakers to not only provide entertainment but also document aspects of our culture for viewers.

How do you respond to the criticism that the film has relied on regressive customs and that it promotes superstition and irrational belief systems and practices?

Indians are deeply religious people and have spiritual beliefs and live their lives according to this. People who don't share these beliefs call such practices superstitions, but even they have their own belief systems. Throughout human history and even before the rise of civilisations, people had strong belief systems. People who criticise these practices as superstitions are entitled to their opinion and I will not cross-question them. I am someone who believes in these practices and as a writer and filmmaker, I have portrayed these aspects.

***Kantara* has a strong subtext of caste discrimination built into it. What inspired you to underline this aspect?**

As a writer, my strength is my keen observation of society. I have seen this society [of coastal Karnataka] very closely from childhood and I've grown up seeing caste discrimination. I belong to an upper-caste community (Bunt) but the ill-treatment of lower castes made an impression on me. Nowadays, caste differences are reducing as societies progress but because *Kantara* is set in the 1990s, I had to incorporate aspects of caste discrimination as well. It was important.

In an interview on a Kannada platform, you said the forest officer represents "nature" and the villagers represent "culture" or humanity. One could say that this is a superficial distinction: that an agent of the state like the forest officer can never represent nature because he only represents power; that, in effect, it is the forest dwellers who represent nature. How do you respond?

I am not talking about all forest officers in *Kantara*; only about the character of Muralidhar in my film. Towards the end of the film, you would have noticed that a transformation takes place in Muralidhar's character and he becomes enlightened. He even offers help to revert [*sic*] the land that has been lost by the villagers. I was trying to convey the message that everyone can live together, so that is why I say that Muralidhar represents nature.

I was speaking to an officer from the Karnataka Forest Department recently, and he told me that now even the department is following this concept of coexistence, allowing tribals to live within the forests and providing them with jobs, and so on. I have depicted such coexistence in the 1990s in *Kantara* and this is just cinematic liberty, that's all.

There are thousands of legends and myths about supernatural forces, particularly in South India. Girish Karnad, for example, dealt sensitively with such a story in *Nagamandala*. With your experience of making *Kantara*, what would you say are the precautions to be exercised so that such films don't end up becoming exotic stereotypes of "primitive culture" for mainstream consumption?

My intention has been to not exoticise the culture of *daiva aradhane*. That is why I attempted to portray the rituals as accurately as possible along with incorporating elements of folklore. We have exaggerated some of the dance sequences for cinematic purposes but these actually exist in milder forms.

You have introduced an educated tribal woman who becomes a guard in the Forest Department, but the film gives her no substantial role to play. The film's two main women are two-dimensional.

In *Kantara*, I have attempted to tell the story of Shiva, the son of a *daiva nartaka*. He is supposed to continue the rituals after his father's disappearance but he goes astray. Towards the end of the film, there is a point of realisation for Shiva when the *daiva* himself reveals his [Shiva's] destiny and, ultimately, he comes to the point where he does what he's supposed to do. Thus, the story is about Shiva and not about his mother or Leela. They are only the support system for Shiva's character. ☐

Vocally local

Among the recent blockbuster southern films, *Kantara* is unique for not being "regional cinema" but a new cinema with its moorings in local culture.

BY **M.K. RAGHAVENDRA**

THE ASCENDANCY OF SOUTH INDIAN cinema in the Indian film market and the eclipsing of Bollywood have taken filmdom by surprise. Many reasons have been offered for this, many of them plausible, especially the fact that the astronomical fees charged by Bollywood stars have made their films unviable. Whether a film is a blockbuster or flop becomes widely debatable in the context of the actual costs incurred. I believe that purely economic explanations such as these are trivial, and understanding the socio-political reason would be more interesting. Popular cinema has a mass following and audience concerns dictate the tendencies of films through the "natural selection" of successful formulae. Conversely, the direction taken by successful cinema provides clues to public concerns.

This article was driven by the success of Rishab Shetty's Kannada film *Kantara,* which has become a huge hit across India. *K.G.F: Chapter 2* (2022) was the last Kannada blockbuster to succeed across India but there is a difference between *KGF2* and *Kantara* in terms of their cultural origins. Kannada cinema, until a few years ago, was a predominantly "Old Mysore" cultural product. It originated in the former princely state of Mysore (once under indirect British rule) and largely addressed the public from that territory. There could not be, in Kannada cinema, a fruitful romance between someone from that region and someone from another part of Karnataka, say Dakshina Kannada (once under Madras Presidency) or Bidar (once in Nizam's Hyderabad).

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

RISHAB SHETTY in *Kantara.*

Mysore had the acknowledged characteristics of a "nation within a nation" and 1956 (when States were linguistically reorganised) meant more to Kannada cinema than 1947, which is the turning point for Hindi cinema. In politics, there was the hegemony of Old Mysore at the State level, with leaders from the other regions, with some exceptions, more likely to find places at the Centre. H.D. Deve Gowda, B.S. Yediyurappa, S.M. Krishna, Bangarappa, Siddaramaiah, and D.K. Shivakumar are from Old Mysore while Oscar Fernandes, Janardhana Poojary, Margaret Alva, and Mallikarjun Kharge are from other parts of Karnataka. Kannada film icons, hitherto, have generally been from Mysore (now Mysuru).

But *Kantara* is a cultural product of Dakshina Kannada, from where filmmakers have only recently entered the region's cinema. A striking feature emerges if *Kantara* and *KGF 2* are compared—*Kantara* is determinedly local while *KGF 2* strives for an all-India appeal. *KGF 2* is "regional" in being a Kannada movie but it has national ambitions and can be reworked in Hindi but *Kantara*, which includes bits of the Tulu language, would lose virtually all its cultural significance if remade in Hindi. I would consider *Kantara* a landmark for Indian cinema, which cannot perhaps be said about the other recent South Indian films that became pan-Indian hits—such as *KGF* (2018), *Pushpa: The Rise* (2021), *KGF2* (2022), *RRR* (2022) or *Ponniyin Selvan: I* (2022). Before explaining why, I must examine the pan-Indian appeal of these South Indian films. This means asking what they offer that Bollywood does not—that is, whether their socio-political content is different.

NARRATIVES OF THE NATION

South Indian regional films have often been remade in Hindi, but they still have a covertly oppositional relationship with Bollywood. To elaborate, Hindi films address a pan-Indian public while regional films address language identities. Sometimes the two identities come into conflict based on the issues and this shows in the films. Dubbing a regional film into Hindi could also change a film's purport, as happened with Mani Ratnam's *Roja* (1992). In that film about a Tamil scientist being kidnapped in Kashmir, the wife grabs a Hindi-speaking soldier and screams at him in Tamil; the film is clearly playing the regional language card, which disappears when the film is dubbed into Hindi.

Regional films generally speak in two voices, one emphasising the separateness of the regional and the other valorising national goals and values. Hindi cinema is relatively uncomplicated since it can be regarded as a vehicle only for national concerns.

If one studies the distribution of male stardom at any time in Hindi cinema after 1947 one sees that three or four stars have dominated at each moment, and each one has carried forward a concern identifiable as a "narrative of the nation". India being a patriarchal society, films dominated by the heroine (*Andaz*, 1949) are specifically about gender issues and the condition of women—as "women" rather than as mothers or sweethearts. This is unlike Hollywood where a woman can be placed randomly in a "masculine" situation (like the military or the police). The "muscular" women in 1930s' and 1940s' Hindi cinema meant something specific in this context. The vigilante in *Hunterwali* (1935), for instance, essentially signalled the weak man, and appeared alongside the first *Devdas* (1935). It went along with a crisis of masculinity in the colonial era duly noted by social scientists such as Ashis Nandy.

The leading male heroes of the early 1950s were Dilip Kumar who through his "method" performances (*Babul*, 1950) articulated the uncertainties of the young nation;

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A POSTER of *Ponniyin Selvan:1.*

Raj Kapoor, on whom rode egalitarian impulses (*Awaara*, 1951); and Dev Anand who problematised the issue of the "modern" (*Baazi*, 1951). There are multiple narratives at any one moment since the nation is a complex "organism" with many issues confronting it that merit narrativising. Hindi cinema needed to address a vast populace across the nation where different concerns could prevail while regional cinema, which addressed language identities, was more grounded in the smaller linguistic territory. Regional cinema could hence afford a single dominant male hero (NTR, Rajkumar, Uttam Kumar, MGR) who appeared in several narratives concurrently and played an enormous variety of roles.

The national narratives in Hindi cinema are driven by expectations about the socio-political future of the country, but with the Hindu right-wing tightening its hold over India, the possibility of multiple narratives has diminished. Patriotic messages have tended to stifle every other kind of narrative. The term "patriotic" is used to describe *The Ghazi Attack* (2017) and *Uri: The Surgical Strike* (2019) but they are not from the same mould as Manoj Kumar's *Upkar* (1967).

> In *KGF 2* and *Pushpa: The Rise*, there is an explicit celebration of criminality, as though that represents "rebellion" or "resistance".

The older film invoked the family life of the soldier and suggested that war was only one activity that the nation was engaged in. The new films, however, are single-minded in suggesting that military/patriotic duty prevails over everything else. By this definition *The Kashmir Files* (2022) is not quite a simple humanistic film about the "ethnic cleansing" of Kashmiri Pandits but is deliberately designed to be about patriotic Hindus brutally targeted by pro-Pakistani Kashmiri Muslims. Also, patriotic narratives (which would include films like *Padmaavat*) can do without major stars since the emotions are simpler; I would attribute the decline of the male star also to that factor.

Salman Khan (arguably) represented semi-urban India's resistance to the increasingly Anglophone culture of the metropolises, but even that has perhaps become irrelevant, with patriotism spreading as a monoculture. Bollywood stars may have become too greedy, devouring much of every film's budget, but they have become so at the wrong time, when there are fewer national issues to narrativise.

When we examine the big-budget south Indian films triumphing at the expense of Bollywood, we find altogether different messages: Resistance to central authority is one that recurs—with unkempt facial hair often marking the protagonist/rebel. On studying the other dramatis personae in these films we find that those who represent authority in *KGF 2* and *Pushpa* are well-groomed. In *RRR*, the anti-British rebel played by NTR Jr has an unruly beard and his associate played by Ram Charan is cleanshaven when serving the British but grows a rough beard when he changes sides. This unkemptness, which goes beyond the macho signification of moustache and beard, suggests refusal to conform.

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

A STILL from *RRR*.

BEARDED REBEL

The protagonists of *KGF 2* and *Pushpa: The Rise* are criminals and there is an explicit celebration of their criminality in both films, as though criminality represents "rebellion" or "resistance". In both the films, an association is made between their immoral bosses and corrupt officialdom and the protagonist as a self-made man with a following of defenceless people. Rocky in *KGF 2* even stands up to the (lady) Prime Minister, a "dictator". In each of these films the conflict is between the regional hero and the central authority.

In *Pushpa*, the Telugu protagonist meets a brutal police officer (IPS) named Bhanwar Singh Shekhawat and humiliates him. *RRR* is ostensibly patriotic but it has the parodic attitude towards patriotism that *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977) had towards the masala film. The protagonists surpassing the British in a dance contest can hardly be read another way. It is the parodic element that Western critics have responded to, and parody is covert mockery of what it is ostensibly imitating.

The corrupt/brutal servant of the law is not a new motif in Indian cinema. It went hand-in-hand with a sense of the weakening state, but the state was usually distinct from the nation. In the sports films of the last decade like *Paan Singh Tomar* (2012), the protagonist loves the nation but hates officialdom. It was as if the patriotic Indian needed to connect directly with the nation without the mediation of the state. The new South Indian films target the state as represented by the police

New kid on the block

After KGF *and* Kantara, *audiences nationwide have suddenly woken up to Kannada films. This could be an opportune moment for the industry to emerge from the shadow of its neighbouring giants.*

By **Ramesh Chakrapani**

Rishab Shetty's *Kantara* has taken the country by storm, poised to breach the Rs. 400 crore milestone at the time of going to press, notching up an unprecedented rating of 9.4 on IMDB, the highest yet for an Indian film, and fans continuing to rave about it on social media.

The film's appeal might be a sign that the Kannada industry is finally ready to join the elite league so far dominated by Telugu and Tamil cinema as national competitors to Bombay in terms of box-office success while Malayalam cinema continues to rake in critical acclaim. The first signs of a Kannada wave came when Prashanth Neel's over-the-top crime drama *KGF I* and *II* set the box office on fire.

Yet, let us not forget that the Kannada industry actually broke new ground in the arthouse movement in the 1970s with bold movies such as *Samskara* and *Ghatashraddha.* Luminaries such as Girish Karnad and Anant Nag established their credentials in other languages as well, while stalwarts like Naseeruddin Shah and Raghuvir Yadav found a welcoming home and meaningful roles in Kannada films. And who can forget that pan-Indian pioneer Shankar Nag, whose *Malgudi Days* delighted audiences from Kashmir to Kanyakumari? However, Kannada cinema's Achilles' heel has been its lack of consistency, with the best films remaining but flashes in the pan.

Whether *Kantara* can break that trend remains to be seen, but we take a look here at some of the big films and personalities produced by the Kannada industry over the years.

Against the titans

A look at how Kannada cinema fares vis-a-vis other bigger film industries in the country.

No. of screens

All India	**9,527**
Telugu	**2,809**
Tamil	**1,546**
Malayalam	**1,015**
Kannada	**925**

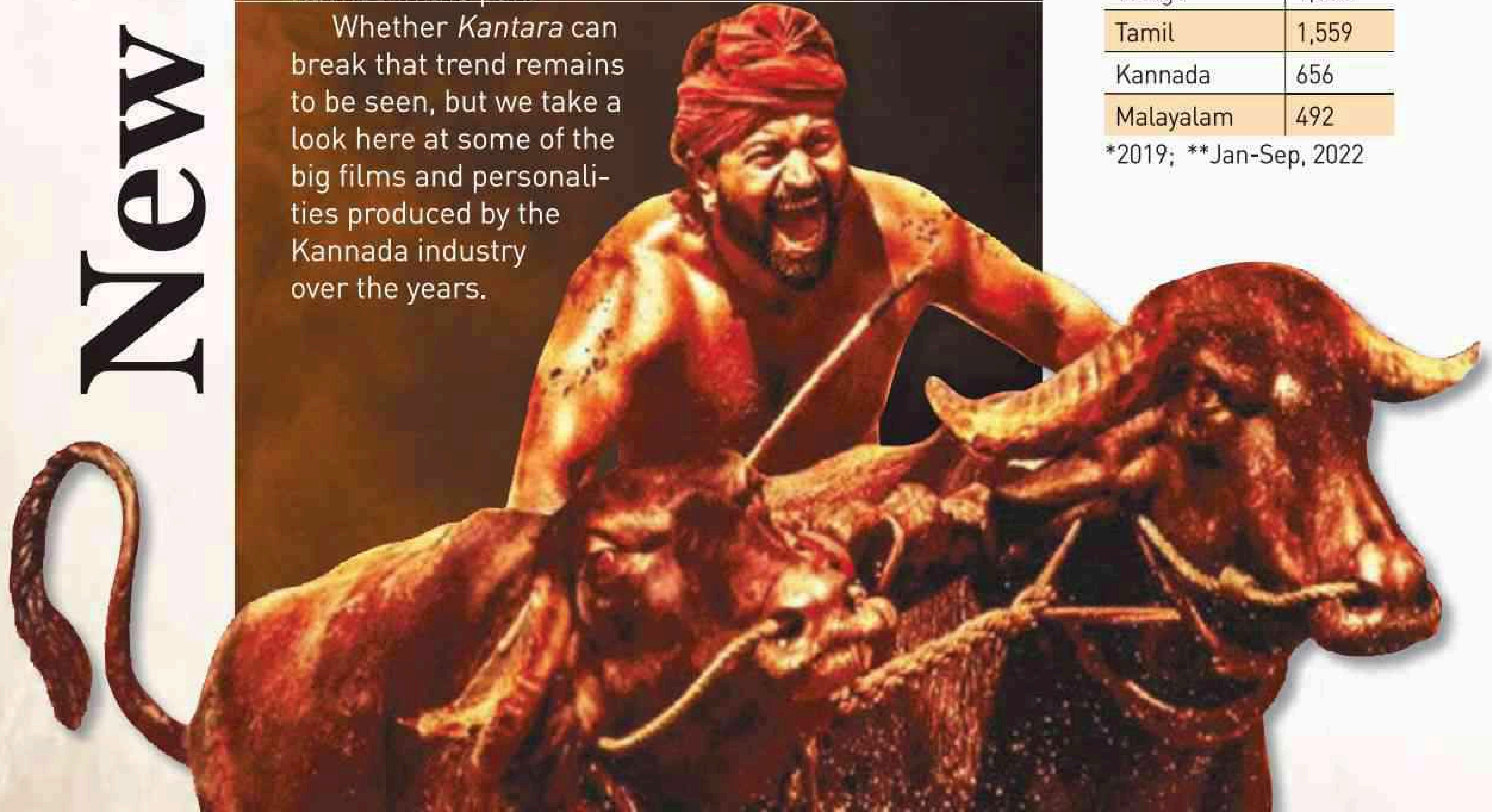
No of films per year*

Hindi	236
Telugu	238
Tamil	223
Kannada	207
Malayalam	170

Box office collections**
(in Rs.crore)

All India	8,205
Hindi	2,708
Telugu	1,805
Tamil	1,559
Kannada	656
Malayalam	492

*2019; **Jan-Sep, 2022



Box office **blockbusters**

The era of big hits no doubt began during Dr Rajkumar's reign in the 1960s through the 1980s, followed by runaway hits such as V. Ravichandran's Premaloka (1987), *Upendra's* Om (1995), *and so on. However, in terms of box office receipts, number of screens and shows, and lasting cultural impact, here are the five biggest Kannada films from the past 15 years, apart from* Kantara:

- Prashanth Neel's **K.G.F. (2018)** and its sequel, the latter being the highest-grossing Kannada film to date, were both action-packed sagas that audiences all over India relished to the hilt.

- Kiranraj's **777 Charlie (2022),** an emotion-packed adventure drama starring **Rakshit Shetty** and Charlie, India's favourite Labrador in the titular role, wowed viewers across the nation, leaving them teary-eyed.

- **James,** a 2022 action drama directed by Chethan Kumar and starring **Puneeth Rajkumar,** who tragically died in 2021, broke the record for the biggest first-day collections for any Kannada film and grossed Rs.100 crore in less than a week of release.

- **Kirik Party,** Rishab Shetty's second outing as director, was a monster hit that ran to packed houses for over 250 days in several cinema halls, even completing one year at a multiplex, and became the highest-grossing Kannada film ever at that time.

- **Mungaru Male (2006),** by Yograj Bhat, was an unprecedented box office and musical success and created several records with its lilting songs and fresh storyline. The film was truly a turning point in the industry's history, just as **Kantara** is now.

A short history of **Kannada cinema**

Formative years

Although the first film was made in 1934 itself, the industry was slow to fully form and established itself as a mainstream force with the arrival of **Dr Rajkumar,** the first matinee idol. His was a larger-than-life presence in Kannada cinema and popular culture overall, and his immense acting and singing talents saw him essay a wide spectrum of roles that endeared him to generations.

1970-2000: Several roads taken

The first whiff of change came with **Samskara (1970),** which heralded the parallel cinema movement in Karnataka. The decade also saw the emergence of luminaries such as **Girish Karnad, B.V. Karanth, Girish Kasaravalli, and G.V. Iyer.**

Although the 1980s did see the rise of one of the most promising film-makers, **Shankar Nag,** who tragically died in an accident when only 36, the decade was largely marked by run-of-the-mill fare and the emergence of popular stars like **V. Ravichandran,** whose debut outing **Premaloka (1987)** shattered all records. The trend continued well into the 1990s and the early days of the new century.

However, an abiding characteristic of the industry has been the silver lining that has always appeared sporadically. Be it the riveting **Accident (1985)** or the intriguing **Beladingala Baale (1995)**, the epic gangster flick **Om (1995)** or **Nagamandala (1997),** the industry has always had the habit of throwing up a surprise every now and then.

Changes in the new century

Mungaru Male (2006) was the first major trail-blazer that came as a breath of fresh air. In subsequent years there have been occasional flashes of brilliance, in movies such as **Thithi (2015).** However, movies such as **Kirik Party, K.G.F.** and its sequel, Rishab Shetty's delightful **Sarkari Hi. Pra. Shaale...,** and now **Kantara** signal a revival in Kannada cinema. With audiences across the country showing keen interest, it remains to be seen if Kannada cinema will seize the day.

Rishab Shetty's heartwarming tale of a headmaster trying to save his Kannada school in Kerala, Sarkari Hi. Pra. was noted for its innovative storyline and fresh treatment.

with renewed vigour, but without a compensating eulogy of nationhood in the abstract as in Hindi films.

Mani Ratnam's *Ponniyin Selvan: I* is more explicit in constructing a regional object for eulogy. The Cholas were in conflict with the Pandyas and it would not be appropriate to praise one at the expense of the other since both are Tamil. So, what Mani Ratnam does is to uphold instead the glory of the place and its times. The film may be taken to be a response to the north Indian bias in Bollywood's historical films in which the Hindu-Muslim conflict dominates.

The only character in *PS1* who might be termed a central "villain" is Madurantaka Chola, who seeks to be placed deviously on the Chola throne instead of the man who would later become Raja Raja Chola. Madurantaka is the only warrior not shown sporting a beard and the significance of facial hair is perhaps to drive home the masculinity of the warriors as people not engaging in subterfuge. The only cleanshaven male in the film is, significantly, a spy pretending to be a devout Vaishnavite.

A SCENE from *Pushpa: The Rise.*

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

To emphasise their valour, the kings are all great fighters and not content to simply lead others. In the *Mahabharata*, heroes (Karna, Arjuna) are different from kings (Yudhisthira, Duryodhana), but here the two are telescoped to facilitate a comprehensive eulogy of Tamil history. Battle scenes ignore the notions of strategy and leadership and armies simply charge at each other, with kings at the fore. The exalted Tamil language used in the film arguably also contributes to this.

CULT GOD

Some representations in *Kantara* find parallels in the films just described, the most striking of which is its protagonist Shiva being engaged in illegal hunting and timber smuggling like Pushpa from the Telugu film. The story begins in 1847, when a king makes a pact with a local deity Panjurli (through an oracle) to give away a part of his land to the local tribespeople in exchange for peace and happiness. The pact is honoured until a descendant of the king (in 1970) demands the lands back; the threat of Panjurli's rage at such flagrant dishonouring of the century-old pact with the deity does not deter him. He threatens to take the issue to court but is found mysteriously dead on the steps of the courtroom, as predicted by the deity.

In the present day, Shiva (Rishab Shetty) is an unruly but heroic figure in the forest where the most powerful person is the king's descendant, Devendra Suttu. He has all the officials in his pocket until Muralidhara (Kishore) arrives there as the deputy range forest officer (DRFO). There is an immediate confrontation between Shiva and Murali, who tries to prevent the locals from gathering wood and hunting boar. The presence of the honest official as adversary to the protagonist complicates the story; Bhanwar Singh Shekhawat, IPS, in *Pushpa* was not in the same mould. If the official has unsavoury qualities, it is convenient to treat his writ as different from that of the state but here the DRFO *is the state,* and it is the state (and not an official) to whom Shiva is hostile. The fact that Shiva and his people are supported by the deity implies that his actions are unimpeachable.

The film has been hailed by Hindutva sympathisers but placing a deity in opposition to the state raises some difficult questions. Panjurli is not from mainstream Hinduism and it implies a conflict between the cult's desire for autonomy and the mainstream's attempts at subsumption. One of Panjurli's manifestations is in the shape of a boar which is interpreted as Varaha, an avatar of Vishnu. But there is the likelihood that the boar being deemed an "avatar" was itself a part of such Brahminical appropriation and there could still be cults that worship the boar without a reference to Vishnu. Phrased differently, regardless of Panjurli being accepted as "Hindu", the deity has an autonomous existence and significance that, to its devotees, need not be telescoped with the mainstream religion.

This aspect of *Kantara* is perhaps too radical for Indian cinema today and Shetty, therefore, engineers it so that the state and the community have a rapprochement at the expense of the local landowner-villain, and a diversionary action sequence achieves that. At its conclusion, Shiva becomes the oracle of the deity although he has been ostensibly killed and his beloved—a forest department employee—is pregnant with his child.

The DRFO is shown to submit to Panjurli at the festival. If DRFO Muralidhara represents the state, his submission to Panjurli is quite the opposite of the nation state being made the sacred object in Hindi films. The way in which the motifs are brought together is complicated and Shetty may not be fully aware of what he has done. But the film allows for "mainstream Hindu" and Panjurli (as a local deity) not having identical constituencies. *Kantara* also suggests that the legitimate interests of the nation's constituents may not be in sync with the nation state.

OBJECT OF LOYALTY

Kantara is singular for not being "regional cinema" as the other south Indian films described here are, but a new cinema with most of its moorings in local culture. Of the

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‘The script is everything’

Interview with **Karthik Gowda** of Hombale Films. BY **VIKHAR AHMED SAYEED**

As the creative producer of Hombale Films, did you back Rishab Shetty the actor and director, or did you back the story of *Kantara*?

We got involved with *Kantara* from the inception of the idea with Rishab Shetty. Once he got the idea, he called me and that’s when we were into the project.

The theme of the film, with its focus on *daiva aradhane*, the culture of coastal Karnataka, tribal issues, and forest rights, does not seem to have the ingredients of commercial cinema.

The film had every commercial element but in the right mix of being true to the culture and nativity of coastal Karnataka. I really don’t understand exactly what “commercial” means according to the language of cinema, but if a film entertains people throughout its running time, then that’s fine for us. We were confident [that the film would do well] and that’s why we went ahead and produced the film. It was a story that was very true to coastal Karnataka, which still continues now and then, and we wanted to tell that to the world.

What was the budget and how much has the film grossed at the box office so far?

The budget of *Kantara* was somewhere between Rs.15 and 20 crore and it has grossed more than Rs.300 crore at the box office as we speak [November 5].

Hombale Films is redefining Kannada cinema with a series of hits. Have you hit upon a winning formula?

Thank you. I think it’s the script and nothing else. You get the script right and everything else falls in place.

What next for Hombale Films? Will you remain with Kannada cinema or will you produce other language films as well?

We are doing films across languages. We started shooting for *Salaar* in Telugu last year starring Prabhas and Prithviraj Sukumaran. We are doing a Malayalam film with Fahadh Faasil called *Dhoomam* and another called *Tyson* with Prithviraj. We have signed a Tamil film with Sudha Kongara of *Soorarai Pottru* fame. So, yes, quite a few films in other languages apart from Kannada.

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

There have been some controversies regarding *Kantara*: the accusation that the film has appropriated local cultures and tried to portray it as a broader part of Brahminical Hinduism, and the charge of plagiarising the Varaha Roopam-Navarasam song. What is your response?

This is a story that is true to the culture of the land. We haven’t portrayed anything apart from that. We have just told a story that is true to the culture of coastal Karnataka so I will stick to that, and on the “Varaha Roopam” controversy, all I would like to say is that the legal team is looking into it.

questions it raises with regard to our milieu and its cinematic representation, the chief ones are: (a) whether attempts to give a single philosophical purpose to a faith as diverse as Hinduism can do justice to its richness. Hinduism’s origins cannot be traced to a single point like Islam or Christianity and efforts in that direction would probably misrepresent it. (b) Whether religious motifs cannot be brought back fruitfully into artistic representations to help them embrace greater complexity.

The dry rationalist approach of official realism has perhaps outlived its utility. *Kantara* is one of those artistic exercises that actually gives religion a good name—because of its relationship with local rather than pan-national culture.

The other south Indian films invoked in this article locate themselves as regional constituents of India although with an uneasy relationship to the nation state, pointing to a desire for federalism instead of unqualified nationalism. *PS1* apparently invokes only Tamil history but its heroic portrayals covertly draw attention to the neglect of the subject in the all-India context. *Kantara* may be in Kannada but it is not “regional” as much as a cinema that acknowledges the local before the regional and the national. Its widespread success suggests that despite the public efforts at building a homogeneous national culture, the local is alive and well and recognised as a legitimate object of loyalty across India. ☐

M.K. Raghavendra is a Bengaluru-based film critic and writer on cinema, culture, and politics, who has written extensively on Hindi and regional cinema, chiefly their political aspects, and published several books on the subject.

Gods of small things

For people in the regions of Dakshina Kannada and North Malabar, rituals such as Bhoota Kola remain an anchor, returning them periodically to a sure and familiar world. BY **GITA JAYARAJ**

KANTARA BURST INTO THE CONSCIOUSNESS of filmgoers in the past few weeks much like its Bhoota Kola protagonist: a quiet beginning shattered by an unexpectedly loud roar.

The film captures the world of Bhoota Kola that is intrinsic to Karnataka's Dakshina Kannada, located picturesquely between the Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea. Bhoota Kola, Kola, and Nema of Dakshina Kannada, and Theyyam and Thira of North Malabar in Kerala may be considered sister rituals. Despite differences in costume and face-painting, in the bordering regions of Kerala and Karnataka they often meld together. Even the language of the myths sung, *paddanna* or *thottam* in the case of theyyam, in the borders is a mix of Tulu and Malayalam.

As part of a contiguous geography and culture, the

H.S. MANJUNATH

THEATRICS, including playing with fire and spraying embers, are a crucial part of Bhoota Kola.

region shares myths, rituals and deities. Even today, Bhoota Kola and theyyam undergird the everyday lives of a large number of people, across caste and class divides. They believe that all good and bad things in life are affected and effected by the local deities, who are tied to the land. The world of these deities thus always exists and becomes embodied in the kola during the ritual.

The origin stories, *paddanna* and/or *thottam,* of many deities speak of them travelling the length and breadth of the erstwhile Tulunadu, parts of Malanadu, and the Kolathunadu regions, either on invitation, as by the king in *Kantara*, or of their own will, looking for suitable places to settle in. Here they are respected and worshipped and, in turn, protect the people of the region. These myths talk of deities travelling inside empty oil containers or water pots or hitching a ride on a cane umbrella, sometimes unbeknownst to the carrier, or on large ships accompanied by a retinue of followers in search of new homes.

In these narrations, a deity's relationship to a territory and its people is very specific. Once a favourable home is offered or found, the deity settles down and the people live and worship in peace. The underlying conviction is that the land belongs to the deities, who have merely left it in the custody of the local chief (also known as raja). It is the raja's duty as the deity's representative to be a fair and just ruler, an ideal king, maintain justice and order in the land in his care, and worship and propitiate the deity periodically. The deity in turn blesses the land with prosperity or, if needed, by guiding an erring polity.

For many people in these regions, rituals such as Bhoota Kola remain an anchor, returning them periodically to a sure and familiar world, despite everyday changes and uncertainties. When the immanent world of the deity manifests through the kola, people transcend the prosaic to participate in a ritual universe.

CASTE BATTLES

Land ownership has always been heavily contested in these regions, especially between landowners, tenant farmers, labourers, and indigenous people. Brahminical origin myths such as the *Keralolpatti* or *Tuluva Gramapaddata* marked out territories and laid claim to land for Brahmin settlers, believed to have been brought to these parts by Parasurama or Mayura Varma. These texts elaborate the unequal status of different castes through ceremonial duties and their interdependence.

The lands thus claimed were worked on and serviced by oppressed caste groups in return for foodgrains and patronage for specific ceremonial duties, which were passed on hereditarily and fashioned as "rights or privileges". Such canny stratification and oppression succeeded in checking resistance to shifting power structures among the indigenous people—the Dravidians—and the Brahmin settlers. Colonialism followed by Independence and the modern state with its land reforms gave rise to further anxieties surrounding land, ownership, belonging, and identity. It is thus not surprising that the question of land and its ownership forms the crux of *Kantara's* three-way conflict between landlord, state, and people.

We see in *Kantara* this collision of an immanent world anchored in an ancient idea of justice, where one's word is proof enough, with the modern world and its judicial systems that rely on evidence and paperwork. It is a confrontation between two kinds of sensibilities—the indigenous and the modern; the people of the region who live by an ancient promise versus Murali, the forest officer armed with maps, borders, and rules. Taking the individualistic approach characteristic of modernity, he fails to recognise the idea of community and the shades of grey that operate within this idea. The institution that Murali represents is a legacy of our colonial past that ushers us into a seemingly rational modernity. However, the ways in which such bureaucratic institutions function hardly seem rational, and even his seniors, perhaps with more experience and empathy, warn him to be more flexible in a world largely untouched by modernity.

Murali's own learning curve in the film is somewhat steep, and much has been written about the inconsistency of his characterisation. Since *Kantara* focusses more on high-octane drama than on the interiority of its characters, the change of heart seems pat. It is only when he realises that the villagers have been duped does he recognise the precarity of their lives, which depend heavily on forest produce. Only when he begins to perceive the stakes involved, for both the forest people and the landlords, does any kind of understanding and empathy emerge.

> *Kantara* places front and centre a seemingly marginal culture restricted to a small geographical region.

As for the landlord, he is depicted as "benign" as long as modernity and its institutions do not interfere with his profiteering. The villagers are under his control; the young and aggressive local hero Shiva functions as his henchman, naïve and to be activated when required. He hopes to use this to his advantage. But when the forest officer begins to ask for land deeds in order to demarcate government land, he realises for the first time that his authority in the area can be challenged.

RICH CULTURAL MILIEU

The villagers are illiterate and have not been particular about documents; he uses this to his advantage, hoping to dupe both the local people and the government. As the descendant of the original raja who gave away this land, he believes it still belongs to him. He scorns the ancient pact between the deity and his ancestor but

THULASI KAKKAT

THE THEYYAM gets in the mood at Paalankallu Gulikan Kaavu in Kerala's Kasaragod.

cannot ignore Murali, who traces the paper trail.

The shift from deities pronouncing judgments to modern legal institutions makes the landlord nervous, hurtling him down the path of self-destruction. While the former relied on the oral pronouncements of the kola and was based on faith, the latter works on proof and signatures. The strong element of faith is reinforced when the current kola, Guruva, because of his connect with the deity, has a disquieting dream about an impending calamity and pleads with the landlord to rectify things. Thus, even before the kola ritual, the landlord has been cautioned to change his ways.

Kantara thus places front and centre a seemingly marginal culture restricted to a small geographical region. This is evident in small details such as the post-prologue Kambala race with which the film begins, a race ritually linked to the first ploughing of the sacred field belonging to the deity, before the Bhoota Kola performance. On the sidelines, events such as cockfights, football, betting games take place and stalls are erected in the manner of small village fairs. The rich cultural milieu of the region is established.

Despite their ostensible marginality, the deities of this culture are worshipped and propitiated by people across classes and castes to this day. Texts like the *Keralolpatti* consolidated hierarchy and caste inequalities but also gave birth to local traditions and rituals that are now an amalgam of the indigenous, the Dravidian, and the Sanskritic/Vedic.

In the *paddana/thottam* narratives, however, these amalgamations can often be deciphered as inconsistencies and discontinuities through which connections to Vedic/Puranic deities are incorporated into the pantheon of kola and theyyam deities. Accusations against *Kantara*'s makers of Brahminic/Vedic/Hindu appropriation of indigenous cultures have led to a multi-way debate. However, apart from the "Varaha Roopam" song (itself in the middle of a plagiarism controversy), an overt allusion to Vishnu's Varaha avatar as Panchuruli Kola, there is little else in the film that reiterates the Brahminical connection.

STRANGE AMALGAM

On the other hand, across the length and breadth of Tulunadu and Kolanadu where Bhoota Kola and theyyam take place, such songs making Puranic connections are common and often played on loudspeakers. Even the deities refer to themselves as *amshams* (parts)—of Shiva, Vishnu, Parvati—making direct connections to Puranic gods. The survival mechanism of Hinduism has long been the complete encompassing into its fold of all local deities, worships, and beliefs (as well as of heterodox philosophies). Today's Hinduism is a sum of innumerable local practices and rituals such as Bhoota Kola or theyyam, and modern Hindu life is a strange amalgam of such varied practices that emerged due to ethnic and political compulsions. What one sees in *Kantara* is a reflection of this.

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT.

SCENE FROM a Yakshagana performance in Karnataka.

What is disturbing, however, is the appropriation of the film's success by followers of political Hindutva. Some of the gushing praise for the film, while seemingly inclusive of the diversity of ritual practices, seems to have murky political designs that push for a monolithic understanding of Hinduism—a political co-opting that assimilates and subsumes all cultural and ritual diversity under "Hindu," with little recognition of antiquity, nuance or diversity.

Some of the criticism of *Kantara,* too, is a reaction against such political designs. Allegations that the film is regressive and promotes superstitions seem to be a reaction against the current political climate as well as a recognition of Karnataka's rich lineage of rationalist thinkers who worked for the modernisation of society and often paid for it with their lives. In such debates, rituals function almost as a political tool to reorganise networks of power.

As early as 2003, Carrin and Tambs-Lyche, scholars of Bhoota Kola, noted that with the increasing polarisation of the ideological discourse, the embrace of the ritual has begun to signify revivalist Hindu policies while its rejection seems an attempt to signify a politically secular position. *Kantara*'s success has returned these debates to the forefront.

Among the many debates of appropriation, one usual argument seems missing—how can a Shetty, belonging to a land-owning, feudal caste, perform a Bhoota Kola? How could he comprehend the struggles of persons from the oppressed castes who perform the kola? In real life, a Shetty would or could be a landlord but never a kola, so could this be considered appropriation? Of course, there are no easy answers. However, to Rishab Shetty's credit, the story is told with empathy and nuance without reducing characters to hero or villain. Instead, they muddle through their confused identities and negotiate a fraught relationship with modernity or tradition through the mediums of state, judiciary, traditions, and rituals.

One might wonder what explains the unforeseen success of the film. But this story about protecting the land and the environment recalls Amitav Ghosh's exploration of the uncanny, the recognition of a seemingly familiar non-human agency that humankind has turned away from. Here perhaps is a different way of telling a story, one that is capacious enough to accommodate uncanniness. While *Kantara* proposes no solutions, the much-lauded finale comes tantalisingly close to a conventional *deus ex machina* by which, in many narrative traditions, earthly problems are eventually resolved through some inspired or (as in this case) dramatically fierce divine intervention. ☐

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N. RAM

A new low for media freedom in India

Criminalising journalism when it takes investigative missteps, falls victim to egregiously false information served up with mal-intent, then owns up, and puts in place new verification safeguards is the thin end of the wedge for the profession.

THE military-style "search and seize" raid conducted on October 31, 2022, by the Crime Branch of the Delhi Police at the offices of *The Wire* and the homes of its three founding editors, Siddharth Varadarajan, M.K. Venu, and Sidharth Bhatia, deputy editor Jahnavi Sen, and product-and-business head Mithun Kidambi marks a new low for media freedom in India.

The police seized various devices and the hard disks of two computers used by the accounts staff under cover of investigating a criminal case. This case is based on a complaint made by Amit Malviya, a BJP leader who heads the ruling party's national Information Technology department, that the three Meta stories published earlier in October by *The Wire* were a conspiracy to harm his reputation through forgery.

The Wire placed on record its demand for the hash value—a unique numerical value used to ensure the integrity of a device and its data—of the mobile phones, iPads, computers, and hard disks seized and for cloned copies of the devices and hard disks seized to be kept at a neutral place. But this reasonable and lawful demand was simply ignored.

The First Information Report (FIR) registered by the police against the journalists covers charges under the Indian Penal Code of "cheating and dishonesty" (Section 420) , "forgery for purpose of cheating" (468), "forgery for the purpose of harming reputation" (469), "using as genuine a forged document or electronic record" (471), "punishment for defamation" (500), all read along with provisions covering "punishment for criminal conspiracy"(120B) and "acts done by several persons in furtherance of common intention" (34).

This is a formidable array of charges. Anyone familiar with the basic facts relating to how the Meta stories came to be published in *The Wire* and the role of Devesh Kumar, the technology consultant hired by the publication monthly, can understand that the criminal case registered is both unjust and over-the-top. *Mens rea*, "the intention or knowledge of wrongdoing that constitutes part of a crime as opposed to the action or conduct of the accused", needs to be established and it is clear as daylight that everyone named as accused in the FIR lacked *mens rea*.

Strangely, Devesh Kumar, who has played the starring role in this affair, is not named in the FIR, although it has been reported that his digital devices have been seized and he has been interrogated by the police, raising suspicions about what the investigation is up to with regard to him.

As for the charge of criminal defamation, an editorial in *The Hindu* (https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/heavy-handed-hurrythe-hindu-editorial-on-the-wire-fiasco/article66092058.ece) calls attention to settled law: “the police should not really be investigating the defamation angle, as Supreme Court judgments are clear that prosecution for defamation should only be at the instance of the aggrieved person, and there can be no police FIR.”

From this, it appears that the targeting of *The Wire* through criminal prosecution at political behest is, first, to push it into a difficult situation where, as the saying goes, “the process is the punishment”; and, secondly, to make an example of it before the rest of the news media.

A CLEAR & DISTINCTIVE VOICE

Now let me come to the journalistic role and responsibility of *The Wire* and its editors in this sorry affair. Let us first recognise that in the seven years of its existence as an independent and not-for-profit digital news media venture, *The Wire* has operated with limited financial and reporting resources but done sterling work that few other media organisations do in India. It has handled sensitive information, offered progressive comment fearlessly, and specialised in complex investigations, its Pegasus-India exposé as a partner in an international journalistic collaboration being an outstanding example.

In a short period, this digital news venture has emerged on the Indian media scene as a player with a clear and distinctive voice, a player who counts journalistically and politically, and is followed by a growing number of serious readers, listeners, and viewers. No wonder that the far-Right Hindutva regime and its supporters regard *The Wire* as an adversary to be silenced or put out of action.

Unfortunately, while working on and publishing stories relating to Meta, India, and the BJP, *The Wire*’s editorial systems failed egregiously. Fed false information and fabricated digital proof by Devesh Kumar, against whom *The Wire* has lodged a police complaint, it reported that Meta’s “XCheck” programme had granted extraordinary privileges to Malviya, including immunity against review of his posts by content moderators, and the right to report any post and have it taken down, no questions asked.

When independent experts questioned this, *The Wire*, after some doubling down on what had been published by relying further on Devesh Kumar’s fabrications, conducted an internal enquiry that detected the fraud, retracted the stories, and editorially apologised to readers. *The Wire*’s editorial (https://thewire.in/media/the-wire-editorial-to-our-readers-an-apology-and-a-promise) promised to learn from this and put in place robust editorial processes for checking and cross-checking documents and all source-based information, and in future have all technical evidence verified by independent experts before publication.

The criticism of *The Wire*’s journalism in the Meta-India stories, and in a couple of investigative articles published earlier, notably a hard-to-believe story by Ayushman Kaul and the same untrustworthy Devesh Kumar about a mysterious super-app known as “Tek Fog” developed by the BJP, is legitimate and necessary. The “Tek Fog” story has now been taken out of public view, pending internal review, and one hopes the publication will soon come out with an authoritative statement on what went wrong in that case.

The criticism that the Meta stories, and possibly a few others, published by *The Wire*, are examples of “confirmation bias”, which is defined as “the tendency to interpret and accept new evidence as confirmation of one’s existing beliefs or theories”, is also legitimate.

In a mostly sympathetic article titled “A prominent Indian independent news site destroys its own credibility”, *The Economist* (https://econ.st/3ULI3oH) made good-natured fun of *The Wire*’s Meta-Malviya story as an example of the well-known tendency of “wanting to believe”—but also pointed to the lesson that “misinformation is generated by all sides”, that “it is often done in good faith”, and that “scepticism is more important than ever”.

With confirmation bias and “wanting to believe”, *The Wire* is hardly alone, and its recent discomfiture needs to be viewed in proper context. Is there any major news media organisation in India or abroad that can honestly say it has not blundered in sourcing sensitive stories or has not purveyed misinformation and false propaganda or has never been taken for a ride by bad actors? The answer is obvious. A shocking example, with calamitous impact, from 2002-2003: *The New York Times*, Judith Miller, WMD, and the Iraq War (look up the literature on the subject).

When a media organisation publishes a story or a series of stories based on information that turns out to be egregiously false, it is unquestionably a serious matter. But the remedy must be found within the media organisation and within the profession. Precisely formulated and actionable codes of conduct and institutional mechanisms for self-correction are important to ensure the

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BLOOMBERG

THE META PLATFORMS INC. booth at the Hong Kong Fintech Week, on November 1. With Meta under intense international scrutiny on various counts, India, with the world's largest number of Facebook and Instagram users, has a vital stake in ensuring that the harms done by disinformation and misinformation on these social media platforms are at least minimised.

integrity and trustworthiness of journalism.

The Wire's editors are experienced and ethical journalists and their work is supported by an independent ombudsperson, or readers' or public editor, Pamela Philipose. Her fortnightly column published in *The Wire* on November 5, 2022 ("Backstory: Only good journalism will steer *The Wire* out of the Meta thicket": https://thewire.in/media/backstory-only-good-journalism-will-steer-the-wire-out-of-the-meta-thicket) is helpful for its critical and constructive reflections and the lessons it offers for contemporary journalism.

An instructive citation in the ombudsperson's column is to an article, written by chief leader writer Randeep Ramesh, that *The Guardian* published for its bicentennial, "What we got wrong: the *Guardian*'s worst errors of judgment over 200 years" (https://www.theguardian.com/media/2021/may/07/guardian-200-what-we-got-wrong-the-guardians-worst-errors-of-judgment-over-200-years). It's an extraordinary read.

There has been more than enough gloating over *The Wire*'s discomfiture and legal troubles in the social media and, to an extent, in the mainstream news media, most notoriously on a couple of television channels adept at doing hit jobs. The question has been raised: was it dishonourable for *The Wire* to throw Devesh Kumar, its journalistic collaborator, under the bus? The answer is simple: under normal circumstances it should and would have handled the matter internally through journalistic due process; but under the present circumstances it had no choice but to file a counter-complaint for legal reasons and to protect its reputation.

Fortunately, in this fraught situation, many professional media bodies, including the Editors Guild of India, organisations of working journalists, press clubs, and individual journalists have rallied in solidarity with *The Wire*. Further, editorials in major Indian newspapers have come out against the police action and the criminalisation of journalism when it stumbles or takes missteps.

EYES ON META

In the midst of all this, the focus should not be taken away from what Meta, which is besieged by controversies and is under intense international scrutiny on various counts, is up to in India. The country which has, at 330 million, the world's largest number of Facebook users and, at 230 million, the world's largest number of Instagram users, has a vital stake in ensuring that the harms done by disinformation and misinformation that still circulate freely on these and other social media platforms, including Twitter, are minimised, even if they cannot be eliminated. The Indian news media have their task cut out: they must do careful and rigorous investigation, applying higher editorial standards, of the ways of the social media giants and the effects of the content circulating on their platforms.

Solidarity among journalists, solidarity deriving from concrete issues and based on principles, has never been more important than it is today. Let us remind ourselves that freedom of the press, which is constitutionally guaranteed as an integral part of the fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression, has come under increasing pressure, risk, threat, and targeted assault in India over the past eight years, after a BJP-majority government came to power at the Centre, setting the stage for a communal-authoritarian offensive that has been termed "the second coming of Hindutva".

Let us remind ourselves that in 2022, India ranks 150th (only a little ahead of 157th-ranked Pakistan) among 180 countries and territories figuring in the annual World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters sans Frontières (RSF), a Paris-based independent organisation that dedicates itself to freedom of information (https://rsf.org/en/index).

I believe *The Wire* and the progressive, upstanding, and fearless journalism it exemplifies will emerge stronger thanks to the lessons learned from this serious setback. ☐

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Modi's battle

In a high-stakes contest in Gujarat, the BJP is hoping to ride out anti-incumbency even as it locks horns with the AAP. BY **ANUPAMA KATAKAM**

THE BHARATIYA JANATA Party (BJP), which has ruled Gujarat for 27 years, was undoubtedly shaken when the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) launched an aggressive campaign in the State a few months ago. Traditionally a battleground for the Congress and the BJP, Gujarat will see a triangular contest this year for the first time in an Assembly election. Voting for the 182 seats are to be held on December 1 and December 5.

The BJP is sticking to its tried and tested strategy: bold optics combined with hype and rhetoric. But this time the party is battling heavy anti-incumbency. There is rising inflation and unemployment, besides the crisis in agriculture. The Morbi bridge collapse, in which 141 people died, and mismanagement of the COVID-19 crisis are also issues that are bound to have an impact on the vote.

INVOKING GUJARATI PRIDE

Looking for a seventh consecutive win for the BJP in the State, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made major announcements just before the Election Commission of India's (ECI) Model Code of Conduct took effect. He invoked Gujarati pride to launch the campaign with a slogan: "We made this Gujarat." And the party is making the most of what it calls the "double engine" government (of the BJP at the Centre and in the State).

According to observers, the winning combination will be the "Modi factor" and the age-old caste equations. The Congress and the AAP are expected to put up a strong fight. "I think there is a surprise element that will play out. The climate is not completely in the BJP's favour," said Anand Yagnik, a rights lawyer and political observer in Ahmedabad.

Modi is leaving nothing to chance. He arrived in Ahmedabad shortly after the election dates were announced and kicked off a high-decibel campaign. Addressing his first rally, Modi said: "Let us remember that the lotus [BJP's election symbol] is our candidate... The lotus has helped Gujarat become prosperous. Every Gujarati, be it an Adivasi or a fisherman, be it a villager or an urban dweller, is full of confidence today.... That is why every Gujarati says, 'I have made this Gujarat.' People have built this State with their hard work."

AAP candidate Sagar Rabari said it was a shrewd move by the BJP. "He tells people that if they vote lotus they will be voting for him," said Rabari. When *Frontline* asked people in a few constituencies if they would vote for the BJP, they replied: "We vote Modi." Party workers place their hopes on Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah. "They will come a few weeks before the election, campaign hard and we will ride home victorious," said a BJP functionary.

Sensing the anti-incumbency sentiment, the BJP dropped 38 sitting MLAs from the first list of candidates. State BJP chief C.R. Paatil called it a "generational shift". It also gave the ticket to defectors from the Congress and to young Patidar (Patel) leaders like Hardik Patel. Hardik, who had emerged as the leader of the Patidar agitation demanding reservation in education and jobs, left the Congress to join the BJP in June this year.

In a first, the BJP planned to reach out to one crore people with a survey seeking suggestions for preparing its manifesto. This could be from a fear of the AAP, which has been working at the grassroots to un-

AT A CAMPAIGN material stall in Gandhinagar on November 7.

VIJAY SONEJI

derstand people's expectations.

However, the ticket distribution has led to protests among BJP workers. In Ahmedabad's Naroda seat, the BJP has fielded Payal Kukrani, whose father Manoj was convicted in the 2002 Naroda Patiya riots case. He is currently out on bail.

In Godhra, the party gave the ticket to sitting legislator C.K. Raulji, who was a member of the district jail advisory committee that recommended the premature release of convicts serving life sentences in the Bilkis Bano rape case.

BIG-TICKET PROJECTS

Modi's detractors alleged that the ECI delayed announcing Gujarat's election dates, which are usually announced along with those for Himachal Pradesh, because the Prime Minister wanted to make major announcements before the Model Code of Conduct came into force.

In late September, Modi inaugurated and laid foundation stones for projects worth Rs.29,000 crore in the State, including the world's first CNG terminal in Bhavnagar, phase one of Ahmedabad's Metro, and the first phase of Surat's Diamond Research and Mercantile City. He also announced Rs.6,000 crore for projects in the Saurashtra belt and Rs.7,200 crore in Banaskantha district.

High on optics, he took the Metro from Kalupur to Thaltej in Ahmedabad and boarded a high-speed Vande Bharat train on its inaugural run to Mumbai.

At Banaskantha, he prayed at the well-known Ambaji temple, and at rallies in Bhavnagar he explained how the BJP had delivered on its 2017 promises to develop the Saurashtra coastal belt. But not all are convinced. "We are not fools to fall for it. You cannot show up a month before an election and think we will be convinced," said Jagdish Vaghela, a bank manager in Ahmedabad.

INDUSTRIAL BOOST

This year Gujarat snagged two major corporate projects: the Vedanta joint venture with Foxconn of Taiwan to set up a Rs.1,54,000 crore semiconductor plant, and the Tata-Airbus Defence partnership to manufacture transport aircraft for the Indian Air Force. The BJP said the projects were part of the Atmanirbhar Bharat (Self-reliant India) campaign, a pet project of Modi's. The "Make in India" and "Vibrant Gujarat" slogans appear to have had an impact on middle-class and upper-class Indians, the BJP's strongest supporters.

> Sensing the anti-incumbency sentiment, the BJP dropped 38 sitting MLAs from the first list of candidates.

Indeed, Gujarat has benefited from having Modi as Prime Minister. Data from the Annual Survey of Industries 2021 show that Gujarat has surpassed Maharashtra in terms of the number of factories (28,479 as against 25,610). With 38,837, Tamil Nadu holds the first place. Between 2002–03 and 2019, Gujarat had the fastest growth in factory count (116 per cent). The State ranks second in the country after Tamil Nadu in terms of formal employment with nearly 20 lakh people.

According to Reserve Bank of India data, Gujarat has the lowest fiscal deficit in the country. In 2020-21, it was Rs.33,536 crore compared with Maharashtra's Rs.54,618 crore. Gujarat's gross State domestic product (GSDP) for 2021-22 (at current prices) is projected to be Rs.18,79,826 crore. This is an annual increase of 13.3 per cent over the GSDP for 2020-21. Maharashtra has logged a higher GSDP, but growth estimates have fallen to 6 per cent. PRS Legislative Research, which tracks State economies, pointed out that in 2020-21, the agriculture, manufacturing, and service sectors contributed 20, 43, and 37 per cent respectively to Gujarat's economy.

Despite the growth rate, the State's social indicators are poor. Gujarat ranks 21 among 36 States and Union Territories in the Human Development Index. At 0.672 per cent, it ranks below small States such as Manipur and Nagaland.

GUJARAT MODEL

In every election since 2002, the BJP has used the "Gujarat Development Model" as a shining example of governance. Ahmedabad, in fact, serves as an illustration of the government's efforts at creating smart cities, with better roads, civic amenities, and electricity supply. However, a few kilometres outside the city it is a different picture. While the highways are world-class, villages off the main road have mud roads, open sewers, and garbage dumps.

On the Gujarat model, a paper published in 2016 by the well-known political scientist Christophe Jaffrelot states: "The beneficiaries of this 'model' were not only the middle class, but also a 'neo-middle class' made up of those who have begun to be part of the urban economy or who hope to benefit from it—the 'neo-middle class' is primarily aspirational. These groups were numerous enough to allow Modi's BJP to win successive elections in Gujarat. The collaboration between the State and the corporate sector—an old tradition in Gujarat—gained momentum under Modi, businessmen benefiting from low wages, acquiring land more quickly and at a better price, and obtaining more tax breaks, etc."

GROUND REALITIES

The AAP has rolled out promises that appear to resonate in pockets of the State: free electricity, better education, health facilities, and higher pay grades in government jobs.

After accusing political parties of promoting a *revdi* (freebie) culture, the BJP has done a U-turn and announced cycles and scooters for women, free LPG cylinders, and employment guarantees.

Meanwhile, the Congress is leading a "silent campaign", said Rohan Gupta, its national spokesperson. He said the party had a strong presence and a clear vision on candidates. ☐

Left high and dry

With the Centre freezing funds for the rural jobs scheme in West Bengal on the grounds that the State was not following its directives, the Mamata government is at its wits' end trying to handle growing discontent among the people.

BY **SUHRID SANKAR CHATTOPADHYAY**

DEBASISH BHADURI

NONE OF THE SABARS of Kultari gram panchayat in West Bengal's Purulia district has got any work under the MGNREGS this year. The delay in release of wages has brought work to a complete halt in the State.

THE CENTRE HAS WITHHELD funds for several welfare schemes in West Bengal, including the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), for almost a year now, putting the Trinamool Congress government in an uncomfortable situation ahead of panchayat elections likely early next year. While the State government tries to resolve the impasse, it is desperately looking for avenues to generate income in rural Bengal. With the State exchequer depleted, as per the government's own admission, and very little investments flowing into the State, the government has its work cut out in quelling the growing discontent at the ground level.

Bengal's rural economy is overwhelmingly dependent on the MGNREGS, which is mandated to give 100 days of work to rural households. In the 2021-22 fiscal, West Bengal topped the list of States in terms of the number of people (1,11,19,765) employed under the scheme and in terms of man-days generated (36.41 crore) was second only to Rajasthan. However, since December 2021, the State has not received funds for the Central scheme, and as a result the total man-days generated until October 2022 dropped to 3.67 crore.

The Centre's reason for stopping funds was rampant corruption in the implementation of the scheme. After repeated requests to release funds, the State government was forced to try to generate alternative means of employment at the grassroots level. Following a meeting with district magistrates, Chief Secretary Hari Krishna Dwivedi stated that the government's "emphasis" was on engaging MGNREGS job cardholders in the schemes of State government departments.

"All departments are requested to engage only unskilled labourers having job cards under Mahatma Gandhi NREGS during execution of their schemes. The field level officers of the departments should be directed to ensure that the implementing agencies comply with this direction," the Chief Secretary's circular dated November 3 stated. District magistrates have also been directed to issue job cards to unskilled labourers who do not have them. West Bengal has around 3.42 crore registered workers under the MGNREGS.

The State government's recent announcement to waive 50 per cent of outstanding electricity bills over a period of time for households and connections used for agricultural work can be seen as an attempt to lessen the hardship brought on by the lack of Central funds for income-generating schemes. The one-time waiver, which includes all surcharges, was also clearly made with the panchayat elections in mind.

The Centre's decision to freeze funds is seen as a long-term strategy to neutralise Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's system of creating beneficiaries, which is a core component of her politics. The implementation of the MGNREGS through the State administrative machinery has been an important part of her method of creating beneficiaries, and Bengal has always been among the top States in terms of providing employment through the scheme. The system has paid her political dividends even in her most trying moment, as was seen in the 2021 Assembly election when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) presented a stiff challenge to the Trinamool. With the Centre stopping funds, this particular aspect of Mamata Banerjee's welfare politics is getting severely hampered with every passing day.

'MISUTILISATION OF FUNDS'

In July, in response to a question in the Rajya Sabha, the Ministry of Rural Development stated that of the Rs.3,989.58 crore the Centre owed to States for the MGNREGS, Bengal alone accounted for Rs.2,605.82 crore. A month later, the Ministry, replying to a question by Trinamool Rajya Sabha member Jawhar Sircar, said West Bengal was the only State that had not received any funds for 100 Days Work. The reason cited was "non-compliance of directives of the Central government".

In her most recent letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi on this issue, on August 5, Mamata Banerjee said: "MGNREGA is a major wage-earning support of the economically weaker sections in the rural areas. Awas Yojana and Gramin Sadak Yojana are significant schemes on providing housing to the houseless and enhancing rural connectivity. Fund due from the Central government on these schemes now is about Rs.17,996.32 crore. State government is complying with all the directions of the Central government. However, funds have not been released, thus creating a huge blockade to implementation of the schemes and putting the rural people in great distress."

> Mamata has been restrained in her criticism of the BJP leadership, including the Prime Minister, and the RSS.

In fact, on August 6, the Leader of the Opposition in the Bengal Assembly, Suvendu Adhikari of the BJP, wrote to the Prime Minister highlighting the government's alleged misuse of Central funds. He claimed that "novel kinds of means and ways" had been adopted in Bengal to "swindle money" granted through Central schemes. "MGNREGA has become the primary source of employment. So it must be ensured that the amount granted must reach the last mile beneficiary who sheds blood and sweat to earn his employment, not to be gulped down by the corrupt people who run the panchayats," the letter stated.

The socio-legal researcher and RTI activist Biswanath Goswami said the Comptroller and Auditor General had not done any audit or inspection on the MGNREGS in West Bengal after 2011-12. "MGNREGA has always been a tool of narrow politics between the funding and the implementing agencies in West Bengal for a long time, and there have been repeated instances of fund mismanagement and fund manipulation by the State," Goswami told *Frontline*.

According to the psephologist Biswanath Chakraborty, the freezing of Central funds will hurt the Trinamool grassroots workers and leaders particularly hard. "These panchayat level leaders and workers have been big beneficiaries of the siphoning of funds within the system. We have seen that with the money flow drying up, the rural cadres of Trinamool are also becoming disheartened and losing enthusiasm for work. If this continues, it will have an impact in the panchayat elections," Chakraborty said.

As of now, Mamata has ordered the district administration to clamp down on corruption at the panchayat level, and the normally outspoken Mamata has been restrained in her criticism of the top BJP leadership, including the Prime Minister, and even the RSS. After the Morbi bridge collapse tragedy, when pressed by journalists to comment, she said: "I will not say anything against the Prime Minister."

For one who has made no secret of her political ambitions at the Centre and has been one of the most vocal critics of Modi, Mamata's sudden change of tone is seen as a "conciliatory gesture" at a time when her government has its back to the wall owing to ongoing investigations on several scams, including the School Service Commission recruitment scam.

VICTIMISING THE POOR

Significantly, the BJP's decision to freeze funds comes at a time when, following its defeat in the 2021 Assembly election, it has rapidly lost whatever ground it gained after the 2019 Lok Sabha election by winning 18 of the 42 seats in the State. Not only did the saffron party fare miserably in subsequent byelections and civic body elections, it also lost a section of its leaders and workers, many of whom returned to the Trinamool fold after jumping ship just ahead of the Assembly election.

Many people feel that ultimately it is the poor who are caught in the midst of a Centre-State feud. "Whatever be the politics, this is victimising the poor," said the political observer and academic Surajit C. Mukhopadhyay. "It is politically expedient to call the Centre's fund-freeze a move against corruption... but what it essentially intends to do is to put the State government on the mat ahead of the panchayat elections. But as a result, the poor are suffering even more. Both the Centre and the State are equally at fault here." ☐

GUEST COLUMN

RESERVATION

PETER RONALD deSOUZA

Revenge of the ruling classes?

Caste, like race, is systemic cultural discrimination and as such needs a reservation policy that tackles both cultural and material denials. Poverty, on the other hand, can be tackled by simpler policy instruments such as MGNREGA, which the EWS verdict misses.

IT is indeed a coincidence that in November 2022, two of the world's largest electoral democracies are seeking to recalibrate their moral goals. In the case of India this concerns the contestation over the core features of the reservation or quota system. Something similar is taking place in the US with respect to the policies of affirmative action. The new social realities that these policies have produced, over the last half century in either country, have resulted in challenges being brought to their respective Supreme Courts. Law is the terrain on which the moral battle is being fought.

In both countries, the introduction of the reservation and affirmative action policies was the result of a self-conscious decision, a political acknowledgment if you will, that India and the US were nations that had sordid social pasts where some sections of their population had been forced to live a dehumanised existence.

India's case for reservation was built on an acceptance that the caste system that had codified all aspects of existence, from using a common village tap, to common dining, to inter-marriage, to even worshipping in a temple, inflicted great social violence on victim communities.

RESTITUTION FOR SORDID PAST

The US case for affirmative action emerged similarly from an acceptance that slavery had brutally reduced human beings to commodities to be owned, bought, sold, and abused, a repugnant past that called for restitution. The reservation and affirmative action policies are seen as just such an effort at restitution.

In the Constituent Assembly discussions in India, a free democracy was imagined that had an institutional and policy order that would give humiliated and discriminated groups reservation in three important social spaces: educational institutions, public bureaucracies, and elected Assemblies. The refinements that followed the initial enactment either advanced or weakened this system of reservation. There is a large case history as well as several academic studies on this issue.

The latest Supreme Court EWS [Economically Weaker Sections] judgment is one such attempt at 'refining' (some will say undermining) this reservation system. In the US, through important cases in the Supreme Court beginning with the benchmark 1954 *Brown vs Board of Education*, which prohibited racial segregation in schools, to *Bakke vs Regents of the University of Califor-*

nia, *Grutter vs Bollinger* in 2003, and *Fisher vs University of Texas* in 2016, to name a few that challenged the use of racial profiling, the policies of affirmative action in university admissions have been seriously contested. Admissions, the challengers have argued, should be colour blind.

The current case, to be decided this November, has been filed by the Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) against Harvard and the University of North Carolina. It alleges that the affirmative action policies of these universities violate the 14th amendment that guarantees "equal protection of the laws". Interestingly, the ethnic composition of the SFFA is largely Asian-American.

Not only have the moral coordinates, in both democracies, changed over time, there has also been a narrowing in their scope as the contours of the imagined nation have altered under pressure from new political realities. Whether this is a pushback, by their respective ruling classes/castes, against the reservation and affirmative action systems adopted is an interesting debate for another time.

My limited brief here is to revisit the initial moral reasoning in India and see how EWS measures up to it. This is important because, on first reading, there seems to be considerable confusion by both learned judges and eminent commentators who have used key concepts interchangeably, as if they are the same (which they are not), and who have replaced the empirical evidence required by their argument with whim and opinion. Virat Kohli had a bad day at the crease.

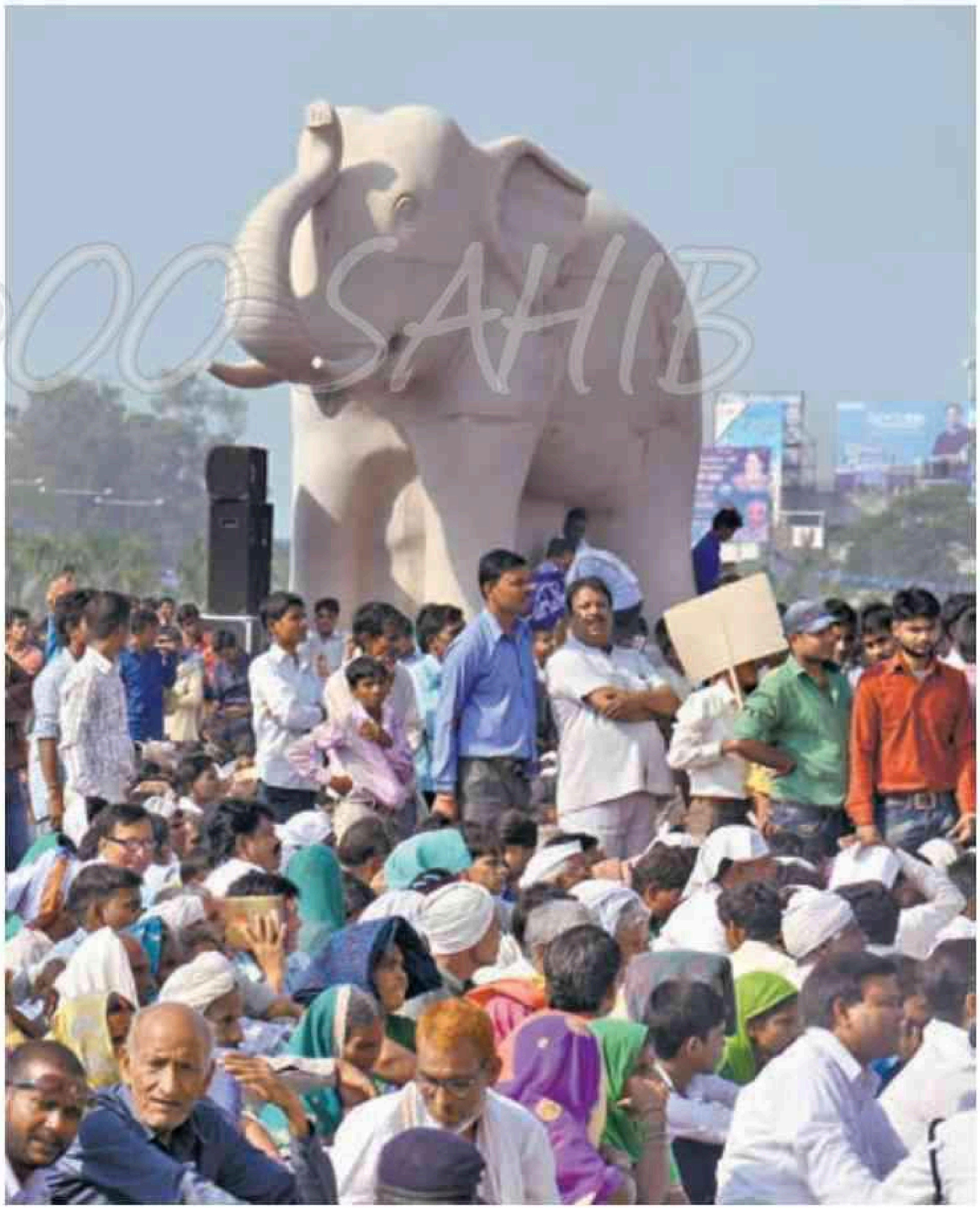
MORAL CLAIMS

Marc Galanter in his scholarly 1984 book *Competing Equalities: Law and the Backward Classes in India* offers three time-dimension analytical frames that produce the moral claims which undergird the reservation system. He argues that victim communities must be offered reparations for the horrors inflicted in the past. Compensation is a way to atone for wrongs committed. But reparation alone is not enough. Something more has also to be done to change the present persistence of practices of negative discrimination. Countering it by policies of positive discrimination is perhaps the way. This too is not enough, since additional action is required for a just and fair future.

The evolving package of reservation policies is seen as the composite that addresses each requirement, reparations for the past, positive discrimination in the present, and policies for an equal and dignified future.

Further, this composite package has three analytical strands, each of which has to be considered independently. The first is restitution, which I have just discussed. The second is the recognition that reservation has the unintended outcome of producing a plural society by producing a petit bourgeois leadership from the victim communities that is so vital for any democracy. The third is the recognition that these policies have, integral to them, both a material and a cultural dimension.

Hence, economic backwardness, disadvantage, inequality, or poverty, are necessary but not sufficient conditions for reservation. The cultural dimension of a social system that imposes discrimination and humiliation is equally important in designing the policy. Systematic cultural oppression is faced by communities and not by individuals. Hence, the policies target com-



RAJEEV BHATT

SUPPORTERS OF BSP LEADER and former UP Chief Minister Mayawati waiting to listen to her speak at an anniversary function held for Kanshi Ram, in Lucknow in 2015. When representatives of marginalised communities become leaders, they become a beacon of hope for their people, releasing them from the mental bondage that had made them accept their inferior status.

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

IT WAS ONLY IN MAY 2022 that Dalits entered the Anjaneya temple in Karnataka's Yadgir district for the first time. Despite laws and affirmative action, victims of the caste system continue to struggle for dignity and equality.

munities who are victims and not individuals, an aspect that appears to be missing or goes unacknowledged in the EWS judgment.

Such cultural oppression produces a cumulative effect of both disadvantage and discrimination, deprivation and humiliation. Reservation policies are one way of remedying this situation. This ignorance of the interlinkages results in an illegitimate conflation of distinct concepts such as discrimination and disadvantage. They are not the same. A poor Brahmin is not half as disadvantaged as a poor Dalit. One has cultural status that gives power in certain contexts while the other does not. One can even oppress the other through exclusion and denial of access to important cultural goods.

ANALYSIS OF JUDGMENT

In addition to studying its conceptual confusion there are other aspects of the EWS judgment that will need to be analysed. For example, does EWS reservation extend to EWS sections among the religious minorities? Can a poor Parsi claim EWS benefits? How does the EWS judgment align with earlier judgments?

Since the 50 per cent limit has now been breached, has it inaugurated an open season to take reservation to 99 per cent? Does the judgment make it imperative for the government to conduct a caste census so that an empirical basis is available to determine quotas for groups? Will it be available for groups who are already reservation beneficiaries? If it does not, does the EWS system violate the constitutional provisions of equality? Is there a time dimension specified after which EWS reservation will cease?

Since reservation is for groups who suffer both discrimination and disadvantage, and since a creamy layer of such groups is excluded, can the concept of a cultural creamy layer be used to describe poor forward castes?

In what follows I shall not offer answers to these questions but shall limit myself to an important argument missing in the EWS judgment, particularly the one concerning the production of a petit bourgeois leadership among victim communities.

SPACES OF SOCIAL POWER

Reservation allows members of victim communities to enter spaces of social power so far denied them by the oppressive cultural rules of the social system. By creating leadership through education, and by placing such leaders in public bureaucracies and the political system, reservation releases victim communities from the mental bondage that had made them accept their inferior status and occupations.

This cultural gain is more important than the anti-poverty programme that the EWS judgment appears to have become. There are many other policy instruments available to address poverty such as MGNREGA and EWS scholarships. Reservation cannot be one of them because of its *two* dimensions: cultural and material.

That is why even though only a small segment of victim groups gets the opportunity benefits, the whole group gets the symbolic benefits. 'One of ours is a Vice-Chancellor'. 'One of ours sits in the chair of the Rashtrapati and has forward caste staff address him as 'Sir'.' This symbolic gain is not insignificant. Reservation is about this cultural achievement.

When reservation produces this cultural leadership, from among hitherto discriminated groups, it will produce not just a more vibrant cultural ecosystem but a more sustainable democracy.

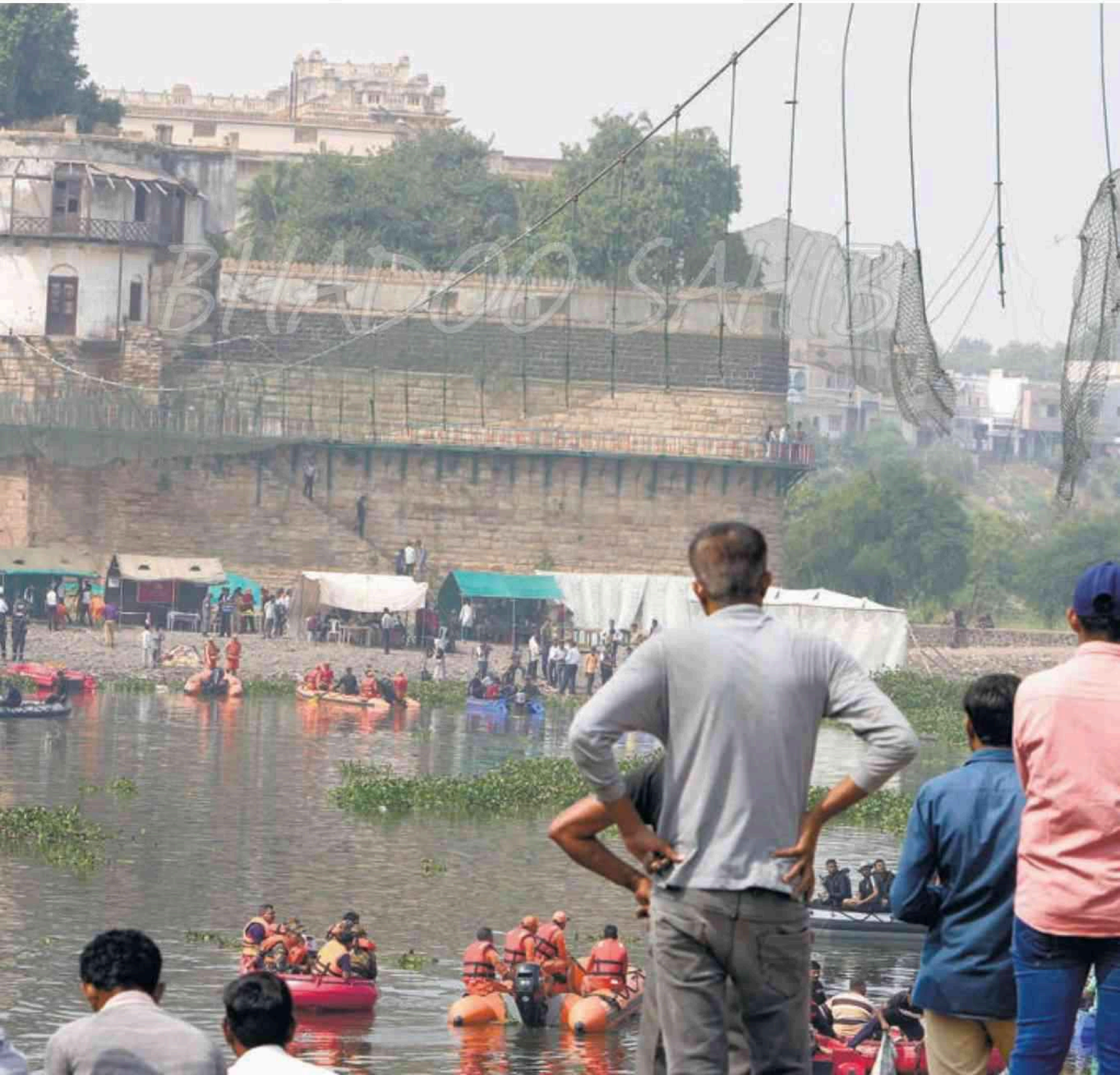
The leadership that will emerge will give 'voice' and 'presence' to the discriminated communities. It will change the landscape of politics, making it more plural, as is happening gradually today in what is referred to as India's silent revolution. It will normalise the presence of hitherto excluded groups within regular political life. Rishi Sunak and Priti Patel, by occupying positions of power, are achieving this normalisation for immigrant communities within British democracy. Reservation hastens this normalisation by strengthening the equal citizenship of hitherto discriminated groups.

The learned judges who have ruled on the EWS scheme seem to suggest that a system crafted over millennia has faded away after 75 years of democracy. One of us is wrong. Ask the anthropologists and political sociologists who study India. They will tell you why some of them see the EWS judgment as the revenge of the ruling classes.

Peter Ronald deSouza is former Director of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla. He recently co-edited Companion to Indian Democracy: Resilience, Fragility and Ambivalence, *Routledge, 2022.*

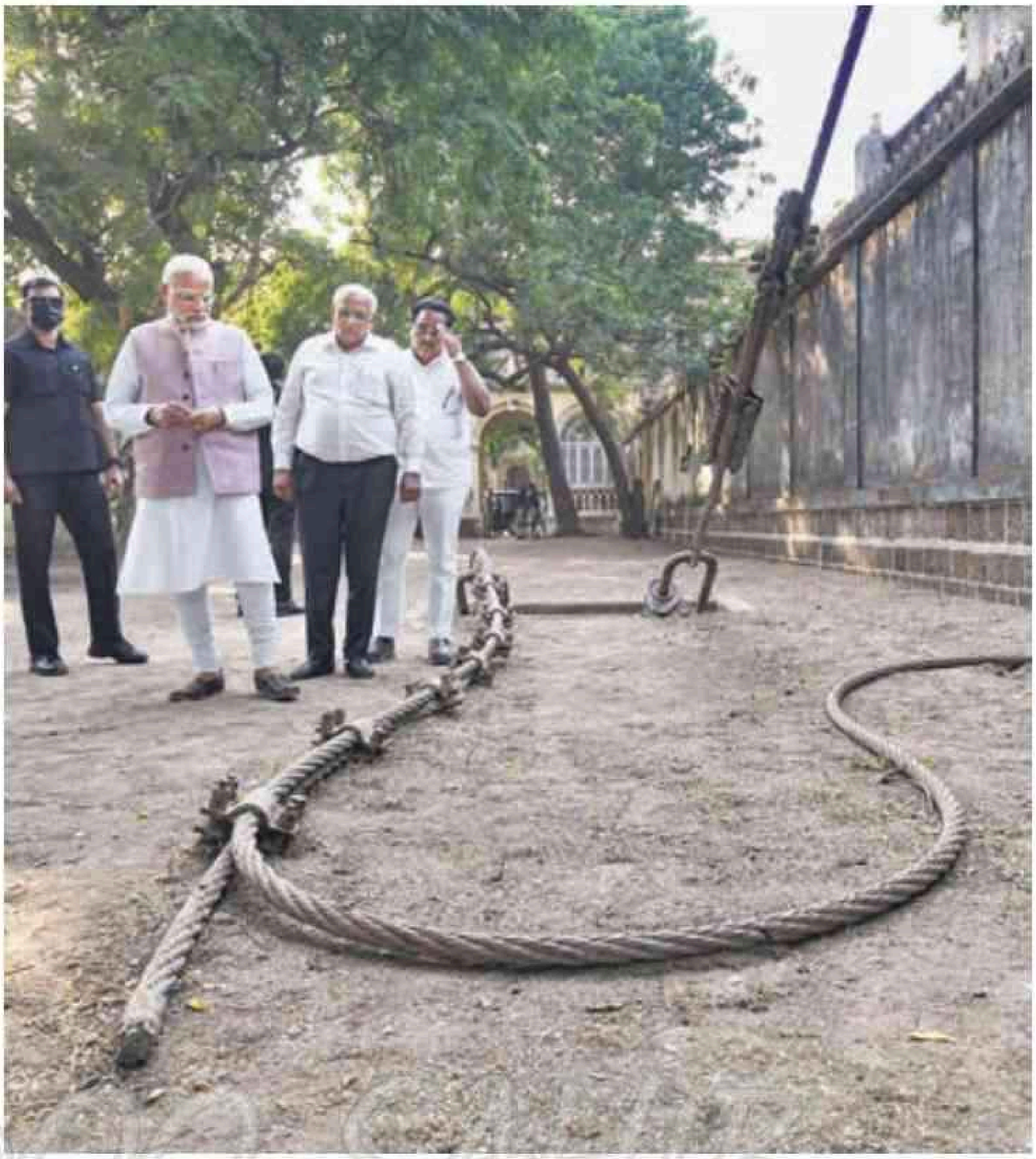
Who cares?

Why was a clock-manufacturing company put in charge of maintaining the heritage bridge at Morbi which collapsed recently, killing 141 people? Moreover, why are the names of the company's owners not in the FIR? BY **ANUPAMA KATAKAM** IN MORBI



"No amount of money can compensate for the loss of our two-year-old. What will I do with these lakhs? I don't even want justice. I just want my child back."
—Preeti Zala, 23, who lost her only child in the Morbi bridge collapse.

MORBI, A DUSTY, UGLY industrial town in Gujarat's Saurashtra belt, had one saving grace—a charming 140-year-old suspension bridge over the river Machchhu. Built by Waghji Thakur (1858-1922), the erstwhile ruler of Morbi, the bridge connected his two palaces located on either side of the river. Over time, as concrete bridges came up, the "*jhulta pool*" (hanging bridge), as it is known, became a popular tourist spot.


PTI

PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA MODI, Gujarat Chief Minister Bhupendra Patel, and others inspect the site of the incident on November 1.

AJIT SOLANKI/AP

PEOPLE WATCH as rescuers trawl the Machchhu river for survivors at the site of the accident.

On October 30, 2022, the bridge broke under the strain of hundreds of Diwali holiday-makers walking on it. As per government figures, 141 people died when they fell into the river after the cables snapped. Fifty-five of the dead were children. The bridge has a capacity for 150, but reportedly 650 entry tickets were sold on the evening of the collapse.

The incident has exposed the negligence of the Morbi municipality, as the bridge was reportedly opened before it received a "fit for use" certificate. An initial forensic report has also found that during the recent renovation, only the floor boards were replaced and not the old cables. While nine people have been arrested in connection with the incident, including ticket sales personnel, the authorities have strangely turned a blind eye to the owners of Oreva Group, the company that was operating and maintaining the bridge and had been given the renovation contract. A week after the incident, the owners remained "missing". Moreover, their names are not on the FIR.

A rights activist in Ahmedabad said Morbi was an example of administrative callousness. "Who cares if a two-year-old child of a driver in a far-flung small town dies in a bridge collapse? It is just a number for them. The only reason the tragedy and victims got attention is because of the upcoming elections," he said.

In Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home State, the Assembly election is to be held on December 1

and 5. Perhaps the reason why the State administration worked swiftly to ensure that the injured received medical treatment and survivors and families of the dead got compensation immediately.

Modi went to Morbi on November 1 and promised every assistance to the affected. A five-member investigation committee has been formed. A week after the tragedy, the Gujarat High Court said it was a "disheartening incident" and took *suo motu* cognisance of the case, issuing notices to the State government and the State Human Rights Commission asking them to produce a report on the incident by November 14.

"We have a good hospital, but there were no rafts or lifesaver tubes. We pulled people out of the river and carried them up the slope to jeeps that took them to hospital. The ambulances and navy came later. By that time many had drowned," said Dinesh Rabari, a worker in the dairy business. "The government worked quickly once it knew Modi was coming. If it was not for the election, I don't think we would have got this attention." Local people agree with Rabari but for now are grateful for the help coming their way.

NO ACCOUNTABILITY

Commenting on the larger issue of safety measures in public areas, Shirish Patel, a civil engineer whose firm does infrastructure audits, said: "Unless public servants are held accountable in some way—there can be punitive measures as simple as withholding promotion for the next five years—they will continue to take the lazy way out, which is to blame either the consultant or the contractor, while taking no responsibility for their choice of either." Patel, who has designed two major flyovers in Mumbai, said: "Technical people in small towns should have access to skilled professionals with experience at the State level, who can serve in an advisory capacity without diminishing the responsibility of safety and maintenance at the local level."

HAUNTING SCENES

October 30 was a Sunday, a day for family outings. This explains why there were so many women and children among the victims. Ashwin Adiyal, 30, has been using the bridge since he was a child. A worker in a clock factory in Morbi, Adiyal said walking on the bridge was one of his favourite activities. "The bridge was closed for renovation for eight months. It opened for visitors soon after Diwali. My friends and I were excited and decided to go on Sunday evening," he said. "We saw hundreds of people coming from the ticket counter. It was the Diwali crowd; the city was full of people visiting relatives."

Adiyal described how some people were making the bridge sway intentionally. "I was not even half way across when we heard a loud noise, then two more loud bangs and the floor fell. I held on to a cable and hung on. My arms could not hold on after 10 minutes. I fell near the river bed, which is rocky. My leg broke. Rescue workers pulled me up and took me to the hospital. It was getting dark and people were screaming for help. I could see some of them drowning. Many were children too young to save themselves. Those visions are haunting," said Adiyal.

Sundari Zala lost her two daughters and their husbands, as well as three grandchildren aged 4,6, and 12 in the accident. "They had come from Rajkot to spend Diwali with us. As my daughters had grown up near the bridge, when they heard it had reopened, they took the children to see it. I don't want anything from the government. I just want my children back. The girls were not even 30," she said, pointing to their framed photographs.

Preeti Zala is Sundari's daughter-in-law. "My sister-in-law took my son along with her to see the bridge. I ran to the river when I heard of the accident. I did not find my child among those rescued, so I rushed to the hospital. He was already dead. He was so small, he must have drowned immediately."

A similar story unfolds in the Raiyani household. Kunjal, 13, along with her three aunts and five cousins died when the bridge collapsed.

CLOCKMAKER CONNECTION

A police officer in Morbi (who requested not to be named) said that preliminary investigations have revealed that the bridge was not strong enough to withstand the weight of the almost 600 people on it. It broke

> A police officer in Morbi (unwilling to be named) said preliminary investigations have revealed that the bridge was not strong enough to withstand the weight of the almost 600 people on it.

THE GOVT
ANNOUNCED TH
OF 132 DEAT
MORBI BR
DISASTER

VIJAY SONEJI

PICTURES AND PLACARDS placed on the banks of the Machchhu river as tribute to the victims of the bridge collapse on October 30, 2022.

from the middle, where it would be the weakest.

At the centre of the incident is Oreva, a Rs.800-crore company better known as the makers of Ajanta wall clocks. The company website says they are leading manufacturers of lighting products, e-bikes, and electronic products such as calculators. According to the chief officer of Morbi municipality, Sandeepsinh Zala, Oreva has maintained the bridge from 2008 to 2018. The company was reassigned the contract in March 2022.

Suresh Desai (name changed), a long-time businessman in Rajkot who is familiar with Oreva, said that the owner, Jaysukhbhai Patel, is from Morbi and close to the State's ruling regime. Patel's father, O.R. Patel, started the clock and telephone brand ORPAT, which morphed into Oreva. Desai claimed that the company was under financial stress and needed big projects. *Frontline* could not independently verify this.

Questions have obviously been raised regarding Oreva's competence to maintain a bridge this size. *Frontline* tried to reach the company, without success. Its website does not list infrastructure or construction as one of its businesses. Authorities and the local police refused to comment on Oreva. According to local news reports, Oreva began restoration work on the bridge in March 2022 by subcontracting the job to a company called Dev Prakash Solutions.

Media reports have claimed that Oreva spent only a fraction of the Rs.2 crore said to have been paid to the company to restore the bridge. The police officer quoted earlier confirmed that preliminary investigations have revealed that the "restoration work" was essentially a paint job and replacement of the flooring. The cables had not been replaced or reinforced. "It appears they opened early in order to cash in on Diwali," he said.

The FIR filed by the Morbi police has charged "the agency responsible for maintaining the bridge" and the "management agency" with culpable homicide not amounting to murder under IPC sections 304 and 308. It does not name Oreva, although the police officer also confirmed that Oreva has maintained and operated the bridge since 2008.

At a press conference, H.S. Panchal, additional public prosecutor in Morbi, said the contractors hired by Oreva were "unqualified" for the job. There are also accusations that the government gave the contract to Oreva without a competitive bid.

MORBI, A SYMBOL

When this correspondent visited the site, all that was left of the *jhulta pool* was its main suspension cables, with the broken vertical wires and nets dangling mid-air. Broken floor boards, cables, and the net which formed its sides were piled up on the banks of the river. Significantly, Oreva Group signboards at the entry and exit point remain intact, their blue signage glowing in the dusty haze that envelopes the city.

Morbi is known as a tile and sanitaryware manufacturing hub, which houses approximately 2,000 companies in a 50 km radius. The area's famous red mud was used in earlier times to make roof tiles and bricks. Gujarat's famed entrepreneurial communities turned Morbi into the largest manufacturing centre of ceramic tiles in the world. As Kanha Rabari, a driver who has lived in Morbi all his life, said, Morbi is one place where employment is not an issue.

The city was once one of the 100 tiny kingdoms that gave the region the name Saurashtra. Its rulers built schools, colleges, a railway line, and a few stunning buildings, including Mani Mandir, another tourist attraction. The State has just about preserved some of these heritage structures. For the rest, Morbi is symbolic of everything that is wrong with India's small cities: poor roads, haphazard development, open sewers, garbage dumps, and lack of greenery. The city has only one major hospital, where the injured were taken that fateful day, and it has a massive temple complex coming up on the banks of the Machchhu. ☐

Season of smog

Air pollution does not respect geographical boundaries. Instead of focussing on New Delhi alone, the air quality in adjoining regions should be addressed and an inter-State solution worked out. BY **ISMAT ARA**

DIWALI CELEBRATIONS IN October kick-started the annual air pollution emergency in New Delhi and the political blame game as well. While the arrival of winter left millions in north India gasping for breath, and cases of respiratory illnesses soared across the region, the focus remained uncannily on the national capital.

Besides Delhi, UP, Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, and Bihar are seeing the worst of air pollution in recent decades. The World Air Quality Report, released by the Swiss organisation IQAir in March 2022, lists 35 Indian cities in the 50 most polluted cities in the world. Of them, 14 rank in the top 20, and all are in north India—seven in Uttar Pradesh, five in Haryana, one in Rajasthan, and New Delhi.

In the full list of 50 feature Bhiwadi in Rajasthan; Ghaziabad, Jaunpur, Noida, Baghpat, Meerut, Lucknow, Kanpur, Varanasi, Bulandshahr, and Greater Noida in UP; Muzaffarpur and Patna in Bihar; Hisar, Jind, Rohtak, Gurugram, and Faridabad in Haryana; and New Delhi. The seasonal factors that result in the deterioration in air quality are well known: the winter haze, fireworks during Diwali, and smoke from stubble burning in Punjab, Haryana, and parts of UP. Stubble burning gets rid of crop residue and helps clear farmland for the next sowing. Such burning has been the focus of all attention for the past few years, with governments offering farmers financial incentives to stop the practice.

However, added to these seasonal factors are intense vehicular pollution and the emissions from industries and electricity generation that mix with winter fog and turn it into toxic smog. Construction dust and brick kilns also contribute to the smog.

At the national level, the emphasis is now on renewable energy sources and the phasing out of old polluting automobiles and the eventual closure of thermal power facilities. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has pledged to have net zero carbon emissions in India by 2070, and his government claims that, by 2030, renewable energy will provide 50 per cent of the country's electricity demands. In the context of automobiles, poor coordination between the pollution control boards and local Regional Transport Offices has made the phasing out of old vehicles a challenge.

According to Venkatesh Dutta, an environment science professor at Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Lucknow, pollution levels in UP are alarmingly off the charts but often go unreported. He said, "The monitoring devices in UP are unevenly distributed with some districts having multiple devices while others have no functional devices. In smaller cities, the reporting is even more scarce; no serious sampling is done. Because of this, much of the pollution goes unreported."

> The World Air Quality Report of IQAir lists 35 Indian cities in the 50 most polluted cities in the world.

According to him, UP's pollution woes are likely to get worse if only because the pollution control board in the State is highly understaffed. "The UP Pollution Control Board swings into action only when there is a cumulative, visible impact of pollution. There is no precautionary approach, no advance planning," said Dutta. Further, Dutta said cases of respiratory illnesses were rocketing in the State because of pollution.

According to Gufran Ullah Beig, a scientist at the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology, toxic emissions can cause long-term damage to people's health. "The chemical composition of the particles that make up PM2.5 matter should be analysed to solve health problems linked with pollution," he told *Frontline*. PM2.5 refers to particulate matter in the air that is 2.5 microns in width.

SITUATION IN UTTAR PRADESH

Among the main contributors to pollution in UP are dust from transportation and construction activities. Several national highways pass through the State, resulting in extreme vehicular pollution. Exposed earth on many of the roads kick up

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ANTI-SMOG GUNS sprinkle water at Lohia Path in Lucknow as the air quality index remained in the "very poor" category, on November 10.

SANDEEP SAXENA

dust and contribute to the worsening air quality. On top of this, many small-scale industries, set up during the State government's push to generate employment, do not comply with environmental regulations.

As for stubble burning, with the failure of awareness programmes, the UP government is considering enforcing legal penalties, including filing FIRs against violators apart from the fines already in place. Farmers have remained stubborn on stubble burning cases because the other measures to get rid of stubble require special equipment and/or biochemicals and are labour intensive.

A paper from the Fire Information for Resource Management System (FIRMS) of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration in the United States reported close to 800 incidents of stubble burning from 18 districts of UP in two weeks spanning October and November.

Support for the farmers has come from Union Agriculture Minister Narendra Singh Tomar, who said recently that he did not like farmers being held responsible for Delhi's increasing pollution. "I am the Minister for Agriculture and I speak for the farming community. I feel that if farmers cause an increase in pollution in Delhi, I am to blame," he said. Erasing the negative connotation associated with farmers, he argued, is everyone's responsibility, and urged both Delhi and neighbouring States to take action to stop the problem.

On the other hand, Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and his Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) have come under fire from Union Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav for failing to address Delhi's pollution crisis. Yadav tweeted: "There is no dispute over who has transformed Delhi into a gas chamber," pointing to an increase in agricultural residue fires in Punjab, which elected an AAP government earlier this year.

While pollution in north India soared, south Indian States enjoyed clear skies and weather. This is because of the different meteorological factors at play in the south. Accord-

PTI

FARMERS BURN paddy stubble at a farm on the outskirts of Amritsar, in September.

ing to S.K. Dhaka, a professor at Delhi University, the pollution levels in southern India are mostly low because of its coastal surroundings. "There are strong winds in the southern regions, while the wind speed is significantly lesser in the northern states," he said.

RAPID INDUSTRIALISATION

High levels of air pollution are also a result of the country's rapid economic development, which has resulted in a surge in energy demand for industrialisation, vehicle emissions, and rapidly growing cities with their upwardly mobile middle classes.

Currently, India's economy is heavily driven by services, but with the "Make in India" programme and production linked incentive schemes, manufacturing is getting a big boost. It is possible that further industrialisation could harm the environment at a time when the nation already has some of the most polluted cities in the world and is still at a very early stage of its manufacturing evolution (around 15 per cent of India's GDP is from manufacturing.)

According to the World Bank, Vietnam has been the world's fastest-growing greenhouse gas emitter over the past two decades, with the share of manufacturing in its GDP doubling during this period. Clearly, rapid industrialisation comes at a cost. According to D.P. Dimri, a professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University's School of Environmental Sciences, air pollution in north India is an alarming issue throughout the year. "At this time, there are several seasonal factors at play, such as changing wind direction, stubble burning, and less moisture in the soil. But the pollution levels are not satisfactory even at other times of the year," he said. He believes that rapid urbanisation is the main reason for this. "It means more industries, more construction activity, increased electricity consumption, and expansion of cities, all of which contribute to air pollution," he said.

Tall buildings have also contributed to the worsening air pollution. According to Dimri, tall buildings prevent the wind from taking away pollutants. "Development comes at a cost. But how much cost can we bear in the name of development? More jobs and better income, of course, are the need of the hour. But development should also focus on creating a sustainable model."

AN INTER-STATE APPROACH

Kalyani Tembhe, Program Officer in the Clean Air and Sustainable Mobility department of the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), believes that an inter-State approach is essential to curb air pollution. She told *Frontline*, "Air pollution does not follow geographical, State boundaries. A single government cannot curb pollution in its jurisdiction without working in conjunction with adjoining States."

In her paper "Managing Regional Air Quality: Need for a Framework", Tembhe writes that the National Clean Air Programme (NCAP), the first-ever national framework to guide clean air action in polluted cities, is completely city-centric.

As part of the NCAP, 132 cities have been identified as non-attainment cities implementing action plans to meet this target. The scientist said that city-centric measures were not enough to deal with the problem. "The pollution in the city does not all originate in the city. The pollution in the adjoining States does not all originate there. There is a lot of transboundary movement of emissions among the north Indian States," she said.

Air quality analysis carried out by the CSE has shown that even smaller towns and cities in north India with much lower annual average particulate levels than Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR) experience higher levels than Delhi during smog episodes.

The Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) in National Capital Region and Adjoining Areas, a statutory body, was formed in August 2021 to tackle air pollution in Delhi-NCR, aiming for better coordination, research, identification, and resolution of problems relating to air quality. Tembhe believes that such bodies are important and should be replicated.

Further, she said that pressure on politicians from the masses is needed to drive better environmental policies. "People need to be made aware of the damage that pollution can cause to health; it will be possible with proper studies to quantify it. This will create pressure on governments," said Tembhe. ☐

The politics of a blast

The October 23 Coimbatore blast has left in its wake a fierce political slugfest in Tamil Nadu and a demoralised police force.

BY **ILANGOVAN RAJASEKARAN**

PHOTOGRAPHS: BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

POLICE AT THE BLAST SITE at Kottaimedu in Coimbatore. The preliminary investigation pointed to the probability of a "lone wolf" attack.

IT WAS OCTOBER 23, THE day before Diwali, the festival of lights. At 4 am there was a blast, and the alarmed policemen at a checkpost some 200 metres away first thought an electricity transformer had blown. By 4:06 am they had called the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board office and the Coimbatore South Fire Station and rushed to the spot. It was only then that they realised the explosion was not caused by a transformer but a car. By 4:18 am, fire tenders had extinguished the smouldering flames. As it is a sensitive and Muslim-dominated area, the blast site was cordoned off well before 5 am.

The enormity of the incident dawned on the police only after they saw some disturbing material near the mangled remains of the car—a crushed LPG cylinder, a second one in the car's boot, scattered two-inch-long iron nails, tiny glass marbles, and a black powder-like substance. The charred body of a youth, identified later as A. Jamesha Mubeen (29) of Ukkadam in Coimbatore, lay near the car.

The explosion, at Kottaimedu, created a furore in Tamil Nadu. Even before the smoke could settle, a pack of Hindutva groups erupted with multiple conspiracy theories. The Tamil Nadu unit of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its State president K. Annamalai immediately hurled accusations against the government. It is perhaps the first time in Tamil Nadu that such a sensitive law and order issue has been cold-bloodedly converted into a political slugfest.

At the blast site that morning, the air was thick with pungent smoke; this and the scattered evidence made the police quickly realise that they were looking at a botched terror strike. Chief Minister M.K. Stalin was alerted at about 5 am; the Additional Director General of Police (Law and Order) P. Thamaraikannan flew into Coimbatore at 10:20 am, followed by DGP C. Sylendra Babu by noon.

As news of the incident spread like wildfire on social media, the investigation teams on the ground grappled with the clues that were slowly emerging. Within hours of the blast, with the investigation still at a nascent stage and the police yet to make a statement, Annamalai launched a broadside against the State government. The former IPS officer-turned-politician, tweeting a day after the blast, had already concluded that it was a "suicide attack" and a "clear-cut terror act with ISIS links". He accused the State government of hiding the "truth" from the public and accused the Chief Minister of going "soft on terror" and playing "minority appeasement politics".

Meanwhile, the Coimbatore Police continued working, aware that the situation could escalate easily into a law and order problem in a city that has been sitting on a powder keg after the 1998 serial bomb blasts that killed 58 persons and injured more than 200.

CONNECTING THE DOTS

The moment Mubeen's identification was established from his car registration number, it became easy for the police to locate his residence, which was not far from the blast site. They seized 109 articles from his home—from explosive materials to jehadi literature. With the evidence, the police were able to reconstruct events prior to the blast.

A senior police officer connected with the probe told *Frontline* that the preliminary investigation pointed to the probability of Mubeen being a "lone wolf" attacker. The police surmised that he could have driven down the explosive-laden Maruti car with the apparent intention of blowing it up near Sri Koniamman temple, a popular place of worship in Coimbatore. What he perhaps did not expect was the presence of a police beat team at that hour at the checkpost near Sangameshwarar temple not far from his target. What happened next has not been established as of now, although it seems apparent that his plan went awry during execution.

Pursuing further leads, the police tracked down five of his accomplices—Mohammad Thalka (25), Mohammad Asarudheen (25), Mohammad Riyaz (27), Feroz Ismail (27), and Mohammad Navaz Ismail (27)—within 24 hours of the blast. The sixth one, Afsar Khan, was apprehended two days later. All of them have been detained under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA).

Before the police could wind up their preliminary investigation and arrive at some conclusions, Annamalai and social media went into overdrive, with diatribes against the police, the government, and the State intelligence unit.

STALIN'S DEFT MOVE

Taking into account these developments and the undue pressure exerted on the police, Chief Minister Stalin quickly convened a meeting with senior bureaucrats on October 26 and decided to hand over the case to the National Investigation Agency (NIA). A press release stated that the NIA had been called because the case could have "possible international and inter-State ramifications".

Stalin's unexpectedly swift move took the wind out of the sails of his detractors who had tried hard to politicise the incident. But even as the BJP officially welcomed the decision, Annamalai kept up his tirade. He claimed that a "specific threat

> Chief Minister M.K. Stalin's unexpectedly swift move to hand over the case to the NIA took the wind out of the sails of his detractors who had tried hard to politicise the incident.

alert" had been sent by Central intelligence agencies (he did not name them) to the Tamil Nadu government on October 18. The State police flatly denied this, saying it was a routine Home Ministry circular sent to all States.

ANNAMALAI'S SALVO

Annamalai alleged that the police had been asked to monitor Mubeen's movements after the NIA had interrogated him in 2019 in connection with a terror-module case in Coimbatore. The deceased, he said, had links with ISIS and was handled from outside the country. He went on to make a communal claim, saying that 60 per cent of the State Intelligence Wing's senior officers belonged to one minority religion and were "acting like missionaries and NGOs".

In fact, Annamalai has been trying to demonise the State Intelligence Wing from the day the DMK government appointed ADGP S. Davidson Devasirvatham as its chief, making the officer the target of his insinuations. He has also accused Devasirvatham of having links with missionaries who he claims are engaged in conversions in Tamil Nadu. He first began attacking the ADGP in 2021 for the fake passports scam in Madurai when Devasirvatham was the City Police Commissioner and the AIADMK was in power. Annamalai even submitted a petition to Tamil Nadu Governor R.N. Ravi on the issue. The Madurai Bench of Madras High Court, however, gave Devasirvatham a clean chit.

Next came the death by suicide of a student in a school run by a congregation of nuns near Thanjavur last year. Along with allegations of conversion, the BJP leader claimed that the ADGP had interfered in the case.

In the latest instance, Annamalai claimed that the Coimbatore blast could have been averted but for the failure of the State intelligence unit, which he demanded should be revamped. Along with Devasirvatham, he faulted DGP Sylendra Babu for having "failed in his duty".

THE ENORMITY of the incident dawned on the police only after they saw some disturbing material near the mangled remains of the car—a damaged LPG cylinder, a second one in the car's boot, scattered two-inch-long iron nails, tiny glass marbles, and a black powder-like substance.

The Tamil Nadu Police reacted sharply to his statements. In a press release on October 29, the State police charged him with "continuously indulging in a defamatory campaign against the Tamil Nadu Police even as the probe in the case was on". The note said that the politician was trying "to divert the investigation". Rubbishing his claims, the police "requested the former Karnataka Police officer not to tarnish the name of Tamil Nadu Police by spreading false news".

In turn, Annamalai claimed he had documentary proof of intelligence failure and uploaded some screenshots on his Twitter timeline to back up his claims. Interestingly, however, he soon began to laud the Tamil Nadu Police for their swift response to the blast. "I am not against the entire Tamil Nadu Police but [only] those two officers," he said.

A second surprise player who emerged was Tamil Nadu Governor R.N. Ravi. At a function in a private educational institution in Coimbatore on October 28, Ravi expressed displeasure over the delay in handing over the probe to the NIA. In a tweet from his official handle, he said he was concerned about the "possible destruction of crucial evidence" in the case. He went on to praise the Tamil Nadu Police, which had established within hours that the blast was a botched terror attack, but he accused the State government of "soft pedalling".

In response, Stalin sent a subtle message by organising a felicitation function for 58 police personnel, including Coimbatore City Police Commissioner V. Balakrishnan, for their meticulous work in the investigation. Stalin congratulated them for quickly securing the site for evidence collection, for their thorough investigation, and for the vigilant patrolling that prevented any moves to create panic in the city.

The Tamil Nadu Police, however, remain unhappy about the attempts to defame them. A senior police officer connected with the probe told *Frontline*: "While the probe is in progress, can any police officer or investigating agency divulge details? It is the first time someone other than the police has intervened while a probe is on. Had we buckled under the enormous pressure to disclose probe details, Mubeen's accomplices would have escaped."

The NIA's first information report (FIR), almost similar to the one the Coimbatore police registered, listed 109 articles seized from Mubeen's house. These included potassium nitrate, nitrogylcerin, red phosphorus, high explosive pentaerythritol tetranitrate (PETN), sulphur, batteries, wires, iron nails, and literature on Islamist ideology and jehad. The accused were taken to the NIA Special Court in Poonamallee, Chennai, which remanded them to judicial custody. On November 10, the NIA carried out raids at 45 locations in Tamil Nadu, including Chennai, Coimbatore, Thanjavur,

THE MANGLED REMAINS of the car. The charred body of a youth, identified later as A. Jamesha Mubeen of Ukkadam in Coimbatore, lay near the car.

Tirunelveli, and Ramanathapuram. Coimbatore had 20 of these locations.

BLAST, BANDH, AND POLITICS

On October 31, the BJP's Coimbatore unit issued a call for bandh demanding that the government "put down terrorism with an iron hand". Vanathi Srinivasan, Coimbatore South MLA, described the bandh as a democratic show of protest. The people of Coimbatore, however, had a different opinion. The nightmarish memories of the 1998 serial bomb blasts still haunt them, and the city has suffered heavily trying to revive and recapture its syncretic culture.

"We do not want 1998 to be repeated. Now we need peace and amity. After the pandemic, we are still struggling to regrow our businesses," said a member of a Coimbatore-based textile merchants' association. Equally, the members of all Jamaaths stayed away from Mubeen's last rites to express their displeasure and condemned the blast. They insisted that nobody should be allowed to exploit the situation to foment interfaith disharmony.

A Coimbatore citizen filed a PIL petition in the Madras High Court against the bandh call alleging that BJP functionaries "were pressuring traders, industries and educational institutions" to down their shutters in Coimbatore. Annamalai quickly sensed the public mood, and when the case came up for hearing, he told the court through his counsel that "he had not given any call for a bandh in Coimbatore on October 31". The bandh was called off.

Various political parties have condemned the BJP's accusations against the State police and the government. Their members have stated that any attempt to create an ecosystem that maligns the State and its police on such a sensitive issue should not be encouraged. The CPI (M) and the CPI called it an attempt to destroy the religious amity established in Coimbatore after 1998. CPI (M) State secretary K. Balakrishnan placed the blame of intelligence failure at the doorsteps of Central intelligence agencies. "If the person involved in the car blast was under NIA surveillance in 2019, how can it shrug off its responsibility?" he asked.

The Congress, the Manithaneya Makkal Katchi (MMK), and the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) condemned the blast and urged the government to take tough action against anyone who attempted to disturb the communal harmony rebuilt painstakingly in the Textile City. The only party to toe the BJP line was the AIADMK, whose leaders, Edappadi K. Palaniswami and O. Panneerselvam, blamed the blast on a law and order failure.

The DMK entrusted the job of countering the accusations to Electricity Minister V. Senthil Balaji, who, at a press conference on October 28, asked the BJP to stop creating panic. He pointed out that Mubeen was identified within 12 hours of the blast and that five alleged accomplices were arrested within 24 hours. The government had ensured that Coimbatore celebrated Diwali as usual, he said, asking Annamalai to hand over evidence, if any, to the NIA and not to the media.

The political storm around the blast has abated for the time being. The NIA is now pursuing the case, chasing leads across Tamil Nadu and Kerala. As of now, the FIR filed by the Tamil Nadu Police has not been updated nor any further arrests made. The blast's political fallout, however, has claimed one more casualty—a demoralised State police. ☐

GUEST COLUMN

JUDICIARY

K. CHANDRU

Illiteracy of the bar and bench

When technology has presented new challenges and laws are constantly being expanded, a proper orientation for persons who are supposed to implement the law becomes necessary.

THE recent salvo by a judge of the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court lamenting the lack of knowledge of executive magistrates and a direction to the government to conduct training and refresher courses for them on basic concepts of criminal law has raised eyebrows. In this case, the lack of training was regarding executive magistrates (Collectors, Revenue Divisional Officers, and Tahsildars) who exercise certain powers under the Criminal Procedure Code, 1973 (CrPC).

The learned judge may be off the mark because these officers, who get through the Union Public Service Commission examination and enter the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), have to go through rigorous training at the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration in Mussoorie. The training consists of several parts, including training in administration and exercising magisterial powers. One may be surprised that learning horse-riding is a compulsory part of the training.

SEPARATION OF POWERS

Even before the CrPC 1973 was enacted, similar powers were provided under the CrPC of 1898. Under the old code, these magistrates also exercised judicial powers and heard cases sitting in a court that was normally called Court of the Sub-Divisional Magistrate. However, after taking note of Article 50 of the Constitution, which provided for separation of powers of the judiciary and the executive, the new CrPC was enacted and many judicial powers were taken away from the executive magistrate. But to the surprise of many, the new CrPC is not notified in many of the north-eastern States even today and the sub-divisional magistrates and district magistrates continue to hear cases sitting in courts even today.

The Collectors, as they are called in the southern parts of India, and District Commissioners in other parts were also empowered as District Magistrates under the CrPC. Chapters VIII and X (Sections 106 to 124 and Sections 129 to 148) of the CrPC deal with the powers allotted to

> A Sessions Judge in Madurai wrote in his order that he was impressed with the lectures given by resource persons at the NJA who insisted upon imposing severest penalties.

COURTESY: TAMIL NADU STATE JUDICIAL ACADEMY

A MOCK COURT SESSION being conducted as a part of the Induction Training Programme for civil judges at the Tamil Nadu State Judicial Academy, Chennai.

executive magistrates. They include the power mostly to deal with the law and order situation and to maintain peace and tranquillity in a local area. This power also includes several other hitherto unknown areas such as Section 133, under which an executive magistrate can pass a conditional order for removal of nuisance. A magistrate who took a municipality to task under this provision received appreciation from the Supreme Court, which recorded as under:

"The Magistrate, whose activist application of s. 133 CrPC, for the larger purpose of making the Ratlam municipal body to do its duty and abate the nuisance by affirmative action, has our appreciation" (*Ratlam Municipality*, 1980). It is under this executive power that prohibitory orders can be issued, security for keeping peace in local areas, and externment of anti-social elements can also be ordered.

Apart from the exercise of executive powers, revenue officers are also given the power of criminal prosecution under several enactments. They also exercise quasi-judicial power under various land reform laws. Under Section 21 of the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976, executive magistrates are empowered to prosecute offenders. However, the Madras High Court struck down the said provision by stating that "the functions of the Judiciary and Executive are quite different. In other words it is clear that the Executive Magistrate has no role to play in conducting judicial trial and recording judicial decisions" (*Gajendran*, 2018).

NEW POWERS

In many different pieces of labour legislation, the power to grant relief has been vested with authorities of the labour department. In the proposed new Labour Codes, vast powers have been delegated to the executive authorities. While the legislative trend moves in a different direction, it is rather unfortunate that the judiciary should take the opposite direction by clinging on to old notions of so-called judicial powers. The modern administrative law does not make any such distinction.

A Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court upheld the Labour Commissioner's power to grant prior approval in case of retrenchment of workmen (Section 25N) as valid even though there is no provision for appeal or revision against such an order. The bench held: "The absence of a provision for appeal or revision is not of much consequence especially when it is open to an aggrieved party to invoke the jurisdiction of the High Court under Article 226 of the Constitution" (Meenakshi Mills, 1982).

The High Court was aggrieved by the action of executive magistrates in not following the guidelines issued by the High Court under Section 122 of the CrPC wherein an executive magistrate can commit a person to imprisonment if he fails to give security or after executing a bond commits the breach of the same. The question is whether executive magistrates have a correct understanding of the law or whether they have deliberately violated the law. No one denies a proper orientation for persons who are supposed to implement the law.

Former Chief Justice of India J.S. Khehar once wrote, "Every day is a matter of learning" (*District Judge*, Gwalior, 2014). It is not only executive magistrates, but even the judges who require training. For this purpose, judicial academies have been established in all States and a National Judicial Academy is functioning in Bhopal.

Commenting on the training, Justice R.V. Raveendran, former judge of the Supreme Court, recently wrote: "But the training is found to be inadequate in many States. Further, in view of the large number of vacancies, many a time, newly appointed judicial officers are posted without undergoing the full course of training. The quality and period of training differ from State to State. Many judicial academies do not have qualified, experienced and committed faculty. Bad or wrong training is worse than no training. The training of new judges should be properly structured and should be of adequate duration”.

A Sessions Judge in Madurai (Tamil Nadu) who took the lectures at the Academy seriously, while ordering the death penalty for an offender (where it is necessary to give a special reason for the same, that is, that it could be only for a rarest of the rare case that such a penalty can be imposed), wrote in his order that at the National Judicial Academy he was impressed with the lectures given by resource persons who insisted upon imposing severest penalties. The Madras High Court upheld this order.

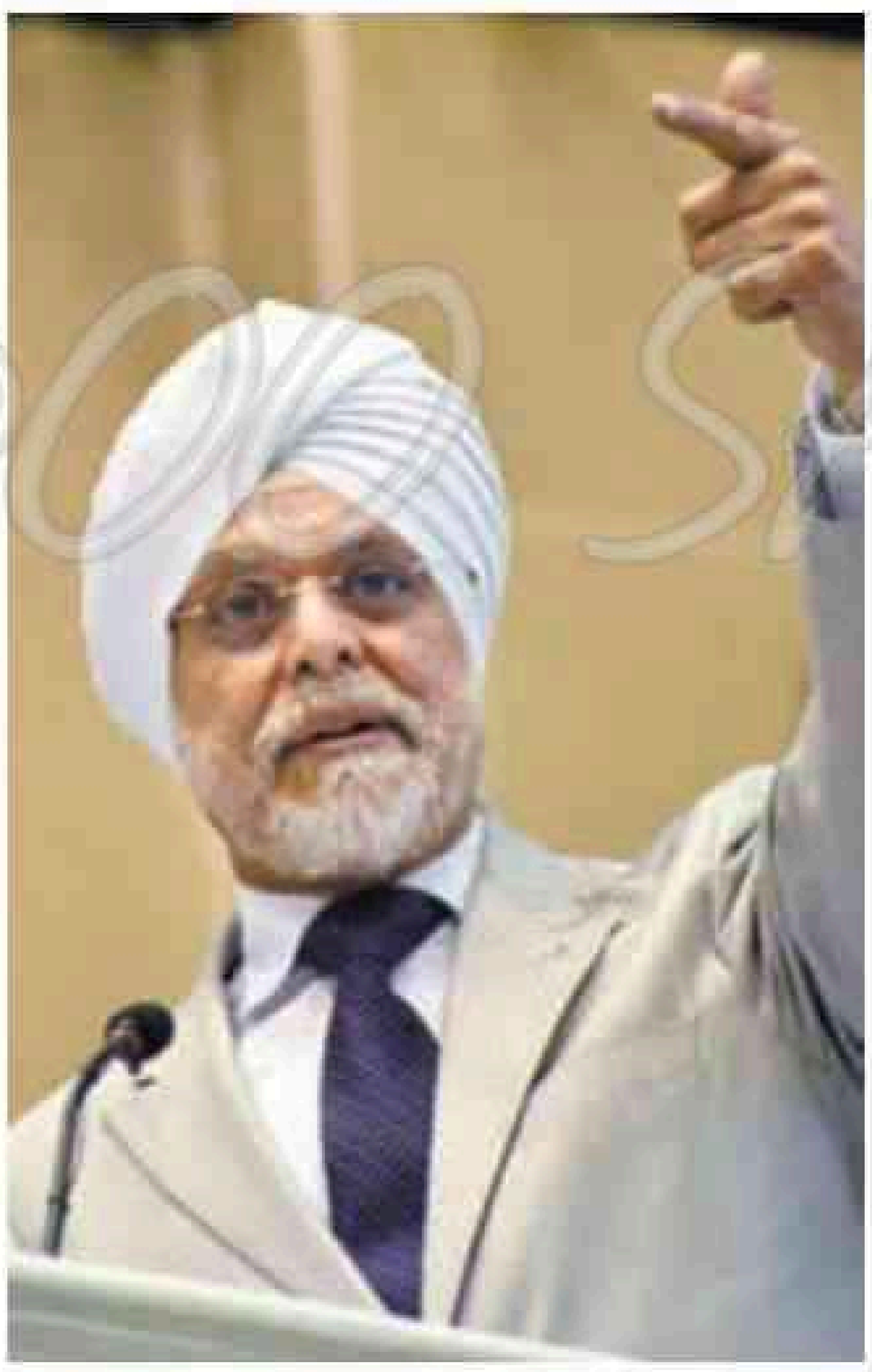
SUPREME COURT’S INTERVENTION

On appeal by the accused, the Supreme Court reversed the death penalty and dealt with the scope of the lectures at the academy in the following lines:

“Criminal Court while deciding criminal cases shall not be guided or influenced by the views or opinions expressed by judges on a private platform. The views or opinions expressed by the judges, jurists, academicians, law teachers may be food for thought. Even the discussions or deliberations made on the State Judicial Academies or National Judicial Academy at Bhopal only update or open new vistas of knowledge of judicial officers. Criminal courts have to decide the cases before them examining the relevant facts and evidence placed before them, applying binding precedents. Judges’ or academicians’ opinions, predilection, fondness, inclination, proclivity on any subject, however eminent they are, shall not influence a decision making process, especially when judges are called upon to decide a criminal case which rests only on the evidence adduced by the prosecution as well as by the defence and guided by settled judicial precedents. National Judicial Academy and State Judicial Academies should educate our judicial officers in this regard so that they will not commit such serious errors in future” (*Omaprakash*, 2012).

While the subordinate judges are bound to attend the orientation programmes and in-service training at the State and national level, which will be taken into account in their career promotions, there is no requirement for high court judges to do so. There are many high court judges who refuse to attend any such training programmes at the National Academy.

They openly say that having been appointed to a constitutional office they do not require any such training. To remove such wrong notions, all Supreme Court judges attended a colloquium at the National Judicial Academy a few years ago.


V. SUDERSHAN

J.S. KEHAR, Former Chief Justice of India: “Every day is a matter of learning.”

> It is not only executive magistrates, but even the judges who require training.

It is rather unfortunate that persons who are selected to the higher judiciary have no requirement of any academic orientation and training. When the development of technology has thrown new challenges and the horizon of new laws have considerably expanded, it is unnecessary to state that proper training is necessary. It is unthinkable that without exposure to different branches of law, one can decide matters of considerable importance.

MANDATORY TRAINING PROGRAMMES

Under the present collegium system of selection, the capacity of a person is never tested and the selection is based on several considerations, some of which have no bearing on the performance to be done by such persons. It is high time the Supreme Court evolves a method by which even members of the higher judiciary are mandatorily required to go for training programmes so as to orient themselves to the new challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant online hearing by courts also exposed the inadequacy of judges in many courts in grappling with the situation.

A judgment rendered by a Himachal Pradesh High Court judge was quashed solely on the ground that it was incomprehensible and it was remanded for fresh consideration. Never in the history of courts has an order been overruled on the ground of an inability to understand the same.

Besides the lack of understanding of an issue, there is one more aspect to the poor quality of judgment rendering. In the adversarial system which India has adopted, the role played by lawyers is also significant. Unless the quality of presentation of cases before courts improves, it may have a direct impact on the decision-making. That is why Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer, the renowned jurist, once said: “The illiteracy of the bench is the direct outcome of the illiteracy of the Bar.” □

Justice K. Chandru is a retired judge of the Madras High Court.

Displaced again

A recent Tamil Nadu decision to scrap some Tantea plantations has triggered fears in Sri Lanka. The tea gardens employ lakhs of plantation Tamils rehabilitated from the 1960s on, and the move might force them out of their homes again. BY **R.K. RADHAKRISHNAN** IN COLOMBO

A TAMIL NADU GOVERNMENT order issued in October this year to hand back tea plantation land to the Forest Department has caused anxiety and concern among plantation Tamils in Sri Lanka. The leaders of the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC), who represent a majority of the plantation labourers in Sri Lanka, asserted that the land had been demarcated and used for tea plantations to rehabilitate repatriated workers from Sri Lanka.

The order, GO (Ms) No. 173, issued on October 3, 2022, by the Environment, Climate Change and Forests (FR.8) Department, states that "the Managing Director, Tamil Nadu Tea Plantation Corporation Limited sent a cost cutting proposal... as the Corporation is facing severe financial crisis.... One of the main cost cutting measures proposed... is handing over some unmanageable, unproductive and wildlife interface areas of the Tamil Nadu Tea Plantation Corporation Limited to the Forest department."

SADANAND MENON

REPATRIATED PLANTATION TAMILS from Sri Lanka arrive at Rameswaram pier in June 1982.

The GO states that if land to the extent of 2,152 hectares is given back, it will reduce the lease/rent liability of the corporation by Rs.598 lakh annually. "The balance plantation area can be managed effectively with the existing permanent workers/contract workers," it said, adding that the workers would be redeployed or covered under a voluntary retirement scheme.

The areas affected include Naduvattam, Valparai (with factory closure), Coonoor, Kothagiri, Pandiar, Cherangode, Nelliyalam, and Cherambady. Valparai has the largest estate in this group (1,069.308 hectares) while Nelliyalam is the smallest in extent (14.23 hectares).

This move does not present much of a choice to many workers because the GO makes it clear that the redeployment will be at a place far away from their current estate. For instance, the workers in Valparai will be relocated to Coonoor or Wayanad. The State government has accepted this proposal, says the GO signed by Supriya Sahu, Environment Secretary, who was in charge of the plantations earlier.

Asked about the government order, A. Raja, MP and DMK leader, confirmed to *Frontline* that it had been issued. "The clause guiding the lease of land stipulates that if no cultivation has been undertaken in a leased land for three years, it would be automatically given back to the department which parted with the land," he said.

He criticised the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) government, which was in power for two terms of neglecting the plantations and running them to the ground.

"There is a lot of work to do and we are beginning with a feasibility study on how to make Tantea profitable," said the MP, who represents the Nilgiris, a major tea growing area in the State. He said no plantation Tamil would be evicted. "They will be given retirement benefits."

Since the government has decided to implement the order, it appears that the plantation labourers in these estates might indeed be displaced yet again. Down the ages, the families of these persons have suffered at least three major relocations—when they were taken to Sri Lanka as indentured labour in the last century and earlier, when the British ruled India; when they were sent back to India as part of a deal between India and Sri Lanka; and now, after the estates are closed.

> Through the ages, these families have suffered at least three major relocations...

CWC'S CONCERNS

Leaders of the CWC said that since the repatriation was a deal between two countries and made via two bilateral agreements—the Shastri-Sirimavo pact and the Indira-Sirimavo pact—tea estate land marked for the rehabilitation of plantation labourers cannot be rescinded.

Both accords specified the number of people that India would "take back" from the plantation areas of Sri Lanka. Soon after Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948, it refused citizenship rights for plantation Tamils and demanded that India take back over five lakh such

M. SATHYAMOORTHY

LABOURERS plucking tea leaves at an estate near Udhagamandalam. Government-owned plantations belonging to Tamil Nadu Tea Plantation Corporation (TANTEA) were set up in the State to employ repatriated Tamils.

labourers, almost all of them Tamils.

The "Agreement on Persons of Indian Origin in Ceylon", which was signed in October 1964, was criticised then by Tamil leaders in Sri Lanka, including S.J.V. Chelvanayakam. The Indira-Sirimavo pact, signed in June 1974, was a follow-up to the Shastri-Sirimavo pact (1964).

By the early 1980s, only less than half of those intended for repatriation actually made the journey back. Many faced a lot of trouble (see "Letchumanan's story", *Frontline,* January 3, 2020).The plantation labourers in the tea estates that the Tamil Nadu government intends to shut down are repatriates from Sri Lanka.

The government-owned plantations in Tamil Nadu, belonging to the Tamil Nadu Tea Plantation Corporation (TANTEA), were set up to give employment to the repatriated plantation Tamils. Though not all of them were accommodated in these plantations, those who were sent there were also given homes near the plantations, which too they will lose now.

CWC president Senthil Thondaman told *Frontline* that he had written to Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, requesting him to reconsider the decision. The CWC told Stalin that if TANTEA was not in a position to continue, then the workers themselves could run and manage the estate. The CWC also made representations to Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Ali Sabri and the Indian High Commissioner to Sri Lanka.

"Now the workers have been told to leave the houses [in the estates] because these lands have been given back to the forest [department]. They have no place to go.... If they have to come back, they have to come back to Sri Lanka because they have no other place to go," he said, adding that in the present economic climate in Sri Lanka, it was unthinkable that anyone would want to start afresh decades after they had been "resettled".

MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

The CWC says that it has a moral responsibility towards the plantation labourers in Tamil Nadu because they were all once members of the CWC. When they were being repatriated, the CWC had given them the assurance that they would be looked after, based on the promises of the Indian government.

Said Senthil Thondaman: "We are also part of that commitment. The commitment was given by our late leader Savumiamoorthy Thondaman about 50 years ago. He is not there now, but the party exists. I am now the president of the party. I have a moral liability to make sure that his [Thodaman's] assurances given to the people are still being honoured."

STRUGGLE FOR RIGHTS IN LANKA TOO

The image of the Indian government in Sri Lanka is that of a benevolent government that has looked after both the refugees from Sri Lanka's once-war-torn North and those who were repatriated. Both the northern Tamils and the plantation Tamils look to India for moral support during times of crisis.

Sri Lankan Tamils are distinct from plantation Tamils, although both speak the same language. The problems that both groups face are different too. The Indian intervention in the Tamil conflict resulted in the 13th Amendment to the Sri Lankan Constitution, and this unimplemented provision remains the only attempt at a political solution to the Tamil question. As for plantation Tamils, many accepted the repatriation offer in the hope of a better life in India.

The CWC's immediate concern is that if the Tamils in plantations in Tamil Nadu are not treated well, there would be questions on whether the plantation Tamils in Sri Lanka would fare any better. "We are already struggling for our rights in Sri Lanka for a long time. So, there will be a question here: 'When you are being chased out from Tamil Nadu, why are you asking for rights in Sri Lanka?' It will have a complication, not today but in the coming days," Senthil Thondaman said.

The CWC facilitated the distribution of goods that India recently sent for people in Sri Lanka, though this was a logistical nightmare. Members of the CWC also help with the release of Indian fishermen held for fishing in Sri Lankan waters. "We take a personal interest in trying to get them [fishermen] released," he said, and added that both the Indian and Tamil Nadu governments should help the plantation labourers from being displaced again. ☐

Netanyahu redux

Benjamin Netanyahu will now be leading, as part of a coalition of extreme right-wing and ultraorthodox parties, the most extreme and xenophobic government Israel has seen since it came into existence 74 years ago.

BY **JOHN CHERIAN**

INFLUENTIAL SECTIONS OF THE US AND European political establishments appear shocked by the results of Israel's general election held on November 1. For the first time, a coalition of extreme right-wing and ultraorthodox parties will rule Israel. Although the US government was quick to congratulate Benjamin Netanyahu on his victory, administration officials went public with their discomfiture about the possible make-up of the government. Right-wing governments around the world were happy that Netanyahu was back in the saddle. Prime Minister Viktor Orban of Hungary and Prime Minister Narendra Modi were among the world leaders to immediately congratulate him. Netanyahu, who first became Prime Minister in 1996, is known to share a good rapport with right-wing leaders around the world, including former US President Donald Trump.

FIFTH ELECTION IN FOUR AND A HALF YEARS

This election was the fifth to be held in Israel in the last four and a half years. The one held in June last year saw Netanyahu's Likud party get the largest number of seats in the 120-member Knesset (parliament). But the opposition forged a wide-ranging coalition of eight parties with differing policies to form a government with a wafer-thin majority. For the first time, a Palestinian party, Ra'am, agreed to officially extend support to the government.

TSAFRIR ABAYOV/AP

BENJAMIN NETANYAHU and his wife, Sara, at the Likud party headquarters in Jerusalem on November 2, after exit polls made it clear that he would be Prime Minister yet again. He first became Prime Minister in 1996.

As quid pro quo, the short-lived government pledged to increase funding to municipalities and areas where the Palestinian population resides within Israel. Ra'am supported the coalition government until the very end despite the war the Israeli army unleashed on Gaza and the escalating state-sponsored violence against Palestinians in occupied East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

The Jewish parties in the coalition, led by Yair Lapid of the Yesh Atid party, agreed to suspend talks on Palestinian statehood during their time in power and to keep Netanyahu out of power and concede the Prime Minister's post for the first two years to Naftali Bennett, an avowed Zionist and former leader of the settlers. Bennett's Yamina party had won only six seats.

It was no surprise that sharp internal contradictions caused the Bennett-Lapid-led "government of change" to fall before it could complete a year in office. Lapid became the caretaker Prime Minister as per the power-sharing agreement. In the latest election, the Yamina party and the centre-left Meretz party, which was also part of the previous coalition, failed to get representation in the Knesset. Meretz narrowly failed to cross the 3.5 per cent threshold of votes required. Bennett announced his retirement from politics.

Despite the Bennett-Lapid-led government being dependent on a Palestinian party for survival, repression only increased in the occupied territories. Palestinians constitute 21 per cent of Israel's population of 9.3 million; 20 per cent of the doctors and 25 per cent of the nurses in Israel are Palestinians. Palestinians living in Israel have the right to vote, but the 5.5 million Palestinians residing in the occupied territories do not have this right. The 7,00,000 illegal Jewish settlers in the West Bank not only have the right to vote but in fact set the agenda for this election: the expropriation of more Palestinian land.

The statements and actions of extremist Jewish politicians in the occupied territories have played a big

RONEN ZVULUN/REUTERS

A SETTLER LEADER holds an Israeli flag during a scouting mission to find new hilltops for settlements near Kokhav Hashahar, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank on November 6. The 7,00,000 illegal Jewish settlers in the West Bank set the agenda for this election: the expropriation of more Palestinian land.

role in precipitating the current cycle of violence. There were more house demolitions and incarcerations of Palestinians in the past one year than in the last few years when Netanyahu was in office. The killing of Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh happened under their watch. The increasing Palestinian resistance since the beginning of the year has only strengthened the hands of Netanyahu and his allies in the religious Right. Netanyahu and his supporters claimed that only a Likud-led government could tame the resistance and put the two-state solution to rest forever.

> One of the first priorities of the incoming government will be to get the charges against Netanyahu dropped.

The 73-year-old Netanyahu, who is still on trial for three separate charges relating to corruption, fraud, and breach of trust, will now be leading the most extreme and xenophobic government Israel has seen since it came into existence 74 years ago. One of the first priorities of the incoming government will be to get the charges against him dropped. In mid October, the Religious Zionism Party, which may bag the Justice Ministry, announced a "law and justice" plan to drastically curtail the powers of the judiciary. If implemented, the plan would give sitting Prime Ministers immunity from prosecution. Critics called it "the rescue plan for Netanyahu" and said it would turn corruption into the "official religion of Israel".

The Religious Zionism Party is expected to be the major partner in the Netanyahu administration. It emerged as the third biggest party in the Knesset, winning 14 seats. The other coalition partners will be two more ultraorthodox parties, the Shas and the Union for Traditional Judaism party.

Netanyahu played a key role in brokering the merger of the far-right Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power) party headed by Itamar Ben-Gvir and the Religious Zionist party led by Bezalel Smotrich. The pooling of their votes enabled them to enter the Knesset a few years ago for the first time.

NEW POWER BROKERS

They have now emerged as the new power brokers, filling the void left by the fading away of other religious, centrist, and far-right parties in Israeli politics. After the results were out, Ben-Gvir talked about occupying the highest political post in the country. "Friends, I am only 46 years old," he told his supporters. "I'm not Prime Minister—yet."

The extremist leader has come a long way in politics despite his track record as a racist and a bigot. In 1995, as a very young man, he threatened Yitzhak Rabin a fortnight before his assassination by another Jewish extremist. Rabin had incurred the wrath of Zionist zealots for signing the Oslo Accords. Today, Ben-Gvir has become an integral part of the Israeli political establishment. The Labour Party, which was once led by Rabin and which ruled Israel for more than two decades since its founding, now has only five members in the Knesset.

Even US Senator Robert Menendez, who chairs the

Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and is otherwise a fervent backer of the Zionist cause, had, according to reports, warned Netanyahu that including people like Ben-Gvir in government would have an adverse impact on the bipartisan support for Israel that has traditionally existed in the US. "Death to the Palestinians" is a favourite slogan of Ben-Gvir's at public meetings and marches. Israeli media has reported that the administration of US President Joe Biden "is following the political developments in Israel with concern".

The religious nationalist and ultraorthodox parties that have replaced the secular parties in the Knesset have been calling for the creation of a theocratic Jewish state in which Palestinians will be reduced officially to the status of second-class citizens. The racist policies that the Israeli state has adopted, which closely resemble the erstwhile apartheid system in South Africa, could soon be formalised. A survey by the Pew Research Center revealed that only a minority of Israeli Jews were in favour of equal rights for Palestinians. According to the survey, 49 per cent of those polled between the ages of 18 and 49 believe that Palestinians should be "expelled or transferred from Israel".

Apologists for Israel continue to claim that Israel is the only functioning democracy in the region. The Religious Zionism Party subscribes to the racist ideology of Kahanism. Rabbi Meir Kahane, an American-born Zionist, called for the expulsion of all Palestinians from Israel and the occupied territories. Baruch Goldstein, one of his followers, single-handedly massacred 29 Palestinians and injured 125 others in 1994. The incident, known as the "Cave of the Patriarchs massacre", is an open wound in the Palestinian psyche. Ben-Gvir once hosted Goldstein at his home in Hebron and used to keep a framed photograph of him there. Ben-Gvir has on several occasions praised Goldstein and the Kahanist ideology.

The Kahanists are classified as a "terrorist" movement by the US State Department. Yaakov Katz, editor-in-chief of *The Jerusalem Post*, said that Ben-Gvir was a modern Israeli version of "an American white supremacist and European fascist". He wrote that a government that included characters like him "will take all the contours of a fascist state". Smotrich once said that Jewish and Palestinian mothers should have separate wards in hospitals. He also claimed that there was "no such thing as Jewish terrorism" despite plenty of evidence of Jews taking the law into their own hands against Palestinians in the occupied territories.

HAZEM BADER / AFP

A PALESTINIAN HURLS STONES at a member of Israeli security forces amid clashes in the West Bank city of Hebron on November 4.

The religious and ultraorthodox parties are lobbying to get key Cabinet portfolios such as Defence, Finance, Justice, and Public Security. Their stated aim is to expand the occupation, and some of their leaders have once again called for the expulsion of Palestinians from the occupied territories. In his victory speech, Ben-Gvir said: "It's time to be owners of the country again."

His party's manifesto promises "the establishment of sovereignty over all parts of Eretz Israel liberated in the six-day war and the settlement of the enemies of Israel in the Arab lands that surround our small country". He said that the people who voted for his party "want to walk safely on the street, not to have our police officers and soldiers restrained, and to completely separate those who are loyal to the State of Israel and those who are not".

In his previous stint as Prime Minister, Netanyahu was on the verge of officially annexing the most productive parts of the West Bank, which is already pockmarked with Jewish settlements. Among the other priorities on the agenda of the Religious Zionist Party are the demolition of the Al-Aqsa Mosque to make way for the reconstruction of the Temple Mount as it used to exist in biblical times; the imposition of Jewish laws; and the undermining of the judicial system that was established when the country gained independence. The Ra'am party warned that occupation of the mosque by Jewish extremist groups would lead to another war in the region.

TWO-TIER LEGAL SYSTEM

The situation for Palestinians inside Israel and in the occupied territories is getting more difficult by the day. Already a two-tier legal system operates in the West Bank; Palestinians are tried in military courts, while the few Jews who happen to run afoul of the law appear before a civil court. Israeli Jews accused of killing Palestinians are let off in no time while Palestinians accused of throwing stones spend years in jail. Rarely have Israeli courts sentenced violent Jewish settlers for crimes against Palestinians.

Palestinians recall that it was the provocative presence of Ben-Gvir in Sheikh Jarrah in East Jerusalem that contributed to the start of the 11-day war in Gaza in May last year. He had been leading a mob demanding the ouster of Palestinians from the area. Ben-Gvir returned to Sheikh Jarrah in October this year, where he was seen brandishing a gun and encouraging his supporters to shoot at Palestinians. Former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak warned that "the unholy alliance between Netanyahu and Ben-Gvir and the messianic racists" constitutes a "true threat to the state of Israel". ☐

Narrow victory

Lula scrapes through in the second round election to return as Brazil's President where the main challenges are corruption, discrimination, and rising inequality in a deeply polarised country. BY **JOHN CHERIAN**

BHADOO SAHAB

NELSON ALMEIDA / AFP

LUIZ INACIO LULA DA SILVA of the Workers Party (PT) speaks after winning the presidential run-off election in Sao Paulo, Brazil, on October 30.

IN A NAIL-BITING FINISH, LUIZ INACIO LULA da Silva was narrowly elected the President of Brazil with 50.9 per cent of the votes polled. President Jair Bolsonaro, who until a couple of months ago was trailing by double digits in exit polls, managed to get 49.1 per cent of the votes in the second round election on October 30.

Interestingly, of the eligible voters more than 20 per cent did not vote and around 5 per cent chose to invalidate their vote by casting either blank or spoilt ballots. This is also the first time since the reintroduction of democracy in Brazil in 1985 that a sitting President has lost a re-election bid.

"I will govern for 215 million Brazilians, not just for those who voted for me," Lula said in his victory speech. "There are no two Brazils. We are one country, one people, one great nation."

Tensions ruled high as Brazilians went to poll. Many pollsters had predicted before the final round that the election was too close to call. Bolsonaro launched a no-holds-barred campaign in the final weeks, promising freebies and spreading falsehoods on social media. Retired and serving senior army and police personnel were among his vociferous supporters on the campaign trail.

Bolsonaro's main focus was on discrediting the process itself, refusing until the very end to confirm that he would accept the result. He had authorised the country's military leadership earlier in the year to keep an eye on the Election Commission's preparations. The military had suggested a few minor changes regarding the electronic counting machines and the commission accepted them. After the first round election in September, the military high command said it found no discrepancies in the counting of votes and in the second round, too, it did not cast any aspersion on the counting process.

ALLEGING FOUL PLAY

Bolsonaro alleged foul play in the first round despite performing much better than predicted. He and his supporters claimed that Brazil's electoral system was seriously flawed and that the results could be easily tampered with. However, there has been no plausible evidence of electoral fraud since the introduction of electronic voting machines in Brazil in 1996. Election observers and experts from all over the world, including the United States, have certified that elections in Brazil are among the cleanest in the world.

Before voting machines were introduced, Brazilian elections were marked by widespread fraud and booth capturing. Bolsonaro and his allies brought up the fact that there was no paper trail after people electronically cast their votes. In the 2014 presidential election also, the centre-right alleged foul play in the counting after suffering a narrow defeat. An audit of the vote at the behest of the opposition showed that there were no irregularities.

There were serious apprehensions in Brazil and the international community that Bolsonaro and his supporters would not accept the outcome of the second round this time. Bolsonaro had said in June: "A new class of thieves have emerged in our nation who want to steal our elections. If necessary, we will go to war." Last year, he told his supporters that there were only three electoral outcomes—either he wins, or he is killed, or he is arrested. "Tell the ba.....s I will never be arrested," he had said.

Edson Fachin, the top Election Commission official who is also a Supreme Court judge, had said that the claims of fraudulent elections were unfounded and dangerous. "These problems are created by those who want to destroy Brazilian democracy," he said. "What is at stake in Brazil is not just an electronic voting machine. What is at stake is maintaining democracy."

Another Supreme Court judge, Alexandre de Moraes, who took over as Chief Election Commissioner in August, just before the first round election, ensured that Bolsonaro did not interfere with the electoral process. While being sworn in, he warned that he would take strict action against those questioning the legitimacy of the electoral process. "We are the only democracy in the world that calculates and publishes election results on the same day, with agility, security, competence, and transparency," he said. It was clear that Bolsonaro lacked the institutional support to overturn the results or to stage a coup with the support of sections of the armed forces. Almost immediately after the results were announced on October 31, many of his senior Cabinet Ministers, Supreme Court judges, and allies in the Congress, including the Speaker, urged him to concede defeat and move on. Almost two days later, he made a half-hearted concession speech in which he authorised the transition of power to Lula.

The new President will be sworn in on January 1. Bolsonaro did not explicitly concede defeat and refused to acknowledge that the election was free and fair. He supported the peaceful protests that were being staged by his supporters all over the country and claimed that the protests "were inspired by feelings of injustice in the electoral process".

He eventually urged his supporters to stop blockading major cities and "protest in other ways, in other places". Truck drivers had blockaded main arterial roads to cities, stopping the movement of essential commodities, briefly inconveniencing life in Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and other cities. In Chile, too, after President Salvador Allende came to power in 1970, the truck drivers' union had led the protests against his left-wing government. Bolsonaro's supporters called for the military to intervene and stage a coup. In fact, many of the protests in Brazil were held near military bases.

> One important reason why Lula's election has been welcomed by the international community is his commitment to preserve the Amazon rainforest.

The protesters said that the blockades were part of the efforts to "paralyse" Brazil and force the military to intervene. In the Cold War days, Washington and the CIA backed the moves against the Allende government. Fifty years later, the situation has changed in Latin America. The Biden administration, like the rest of the international community, was quick to welcome Lula's victory.

CHRISTIAN INFLUENCE

The only people outside Brazil who supported the allegations that Bolsonaro was cheated out of victory were Donald Trump's supporters in the Republican Party. The majority of Trump supporters continue to believe that the 2020 presidential election in the US was stolen. Polls show that three out of four Bolsonaro supporters also

ANDRESSA ANHOLETE / GETTY IMAGES

JAIR BOLSONARO, the outgoing President, speaks to the media on November 1. He did not acknowledge defeat and asked supporters to continue peaceful protests.

believe that the recent election in Brazil was stolen. And, like Trump, Bolsonaro has the solid backing of the Christian Right. Evangelical groups, to which more than 30 per cent of the population belongs, threw their support behind Bolsonaro in a big way.

Lula had to publicly deny that he had "a pact with the devil" or that he supported "abortion rights". Both evangelical and Catholic Christians are opposed to the legalisation of abortion rights. The Christian groups supporting Bolsonaro were also critical about the Workers' Party's stance on gay rights and the right of people to practice Afro-Brazilian religious traditions.

One of the factors that led to an erosion of Lula's support base was the inroads Christian fundamentalists have made in Brazilian society in general and among the working class and the poor in particular. Also, weeks before the final round, Bolsonaro ordered a 50 per cent increase in welfare payments for the poorest section of Brazilians. This move also helped Bolsonaro get votes which would have otherwise gone to Lula.

CHALLENGES FOR LULA

All the same, it has been a remarkable comeback for Lula and a momentous event not only for Brazil but the entire region. Recent elections in Chile, Colombia, and Honduras resulted in victories for the Left. Six of the seven largest countries in the region have elected left-wing presidents since 2018. A defeat in Brazil for Lula, Latin America's left-wing icon, against an unreconstructed right-wing leader like Bolsonaro would have been a serious setback for progressive forces in the region.

But Lula faces immense challenges in a deeply polarised country. The man who left the presidency with an unprecedented 80 per cent approval rating in 2011 is today viewed with suspicion and even outright hatred by a significant section of the populace. Though the Brazilian Supreme Court threw out his conviction for corruption after he had spent 580 days in prison, many Brazilians continue to believe that he was guilty. In television debates, both Bolsonaro and Lula accused each other of indulging in corrupt practices. The Supreme Court while throwing out the charges against Lula ruled that the trial court judge was biased. The court, however, did not give a specific ruling acquitting Lula of corruption charges but allowed him to run for the presidency.

The unproven charges will dog Lula as he strives to fulfil his promises. Lula has pledged to lift up the living standards of the poor. Bolsonaro's gross mishandling of the pandemic had a terrible impact on the economy, worsening the living standards of the middle and working classes. More than 7,00,000 Brazilians lost their lives in the pandemic.

In his victory speech, Lula promised to fight against discrimination and inequality. He said he would expand welfare measures for the poor, introduce a higher minimum wage, and build more affordable housing. To finance this scheme, the new government aims to substantially increase taxes on affluent sections of society.

But Lula faces an uphill task. The Workers' Party's representation in both the Upper and Lower Houses of the legislature has shrunk considerably. Extreme right-wing parties have made significant gains in this year's elections. Sao Paulo, Brazil's industrial hub and until recently a Workers' Party stronghold, is now under the control of the right wing. A centre-right bloc of parties controls the majority in both houses. Lula's hand-picked successor, Dilma Rousseff, was not allowed to complete her term in office by a legislature dominated by opposition parties. She was impeached on fabricated charges.

THE GREEN REASON

Lula is one of the key architects of the BRICS grouping and is immensely respected by leaders of the global south for his efforts to build a multipolar world.

One important reason why Lula's election has been welcomed by the international community is his commitment to preserve the Amazon rainforest region. Bolsonaro allowed ranchers, miners, and agribusiness companies to move into the area. His government slashed funds for the environmental agencies tasked with protecting the rainforest and its original inhabitants. Deforestation coupled with wildfires soared during the last four years.

Lula has said that his government will "be open to international cooperation to preserve the Amazon, whether in the form of scientific research or investments". At the same time, he emphasised that his government would fight for "a fair global trade" to replace current trading practices that "condemns our country to be an eternal exporter of raw materials". With about 115 million Brazilians fighting "food insecurity", Lula has a herculean task ahead of him. ☐

Yawning gap

The Union Rural Development Ministry's sixth Common Review Mission Report highlights the gaps in States' implementation of poverty alleviation schemes across the country.

BY **T.K. RAJALAKSHMI**

THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT has claimed that schemes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) "acted as a boon for the populace" in the pandemic years, when cities saw a reverse migration because of the lockdown. However, the Ministry of Rural Development's (MoRD) Sixth Common Review Mission, which examines rural development schemes in seven States—Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Nagaland—and the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir, admits that their benefits did not reach significant pockets of the country.

The 32-member team's review, held from February 17 to 28, focusses on the timely release of MGNREGS wage funds, demand for work, the status of unspent balances, skill training schemes for employment, rural housing and roads, manpower shortages, grievance redress systems, and so on.

The CRM's overall evaluation of schemes implemented by States in collaboration with the Centre in selected gram panchayats reveals a mixed bag. Almost all States were concerned about the delay in MGNREGS wage payments and a lack of human resources at all levels to implement rural development programmes.

In terms of the MGNREGS, there was a higher demand for work from 72 per cent more households in July 2020 than in the same period in the previous year and from 66 per cent more households in August 2021 than in the corresponding month in 2019. The demand "broke all records" with 5.53 crore households making use of the job guarantee scheme in the first four months of 2021-22. However, the report is critical of centrally designed schemes and policies that leave little scope for "customisation and flexibilty" and ignore local needs.

HIGH AND DRY

In Andhra Pradesh's tribal and dry regions, there was a demand to raise the number of MGNREGS employment days from 100 to 150, which indicates the extent of need.

Additionally, many backward and vulnerable tribally populated areas in the State were not included in the Pradhan Mantri Grameen Sadak Yojana (rural roads scheme). Self-help groups led by women were successful, but older SHG members said it was hard to get loans.

Farmer Producer Organisations, a concept the Centre actively promotes to help small and marginal farmers gain access to credit and markets, were found charging high rates of interest. The retail trade training provided by the Rural Self Employment Training Institutes (RSTEI) was not well received by the trainees, most of whom were in the 18-22 age group and were there due to lack of choice. As much as Rs.20 crore was pending in arrears towards the training institutes.

In Arunachal Pradesh, there was a demand for 2.5 crore person-days under the MGNREGS, but the Ministry allocated only 1 crore person-days, that is, 40 days for every job card holder. Scheduled Tribe job card holders reported delays in wages since end-January 2022.

Under a new category-based payment system, State governments

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

DELAY IN PAYMENT OF WAGES is a point of discussion at this worksite in Alluru village in Prakasam district, Andhra Pradesh, in July 2022.

were required to create three separate Fund Transfer Orders for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes. This created tensions between communities, as some social groups were reportedly paid earlier than others. A parliamentary panel in March 2022 recommended the discontinuation of this system of payment.

Sanctions under the Prime Minister Awas Yojana (PMAY, housing scheme) were made only till 2016-17 in the State and no pension had been disbursed since 2018-19 in the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP). The report also notes that the Centre's share of Rs.300 a month for pension is inadequate.

For all the gram panchayats the team visited, there was only one RSTEI and that too with poor infrastructure. The report recommends that each district in the State have one RSTEI.

NO BIOMETRIC ATTENDANCE

In the nine gram panchayats the team visited in Gujarat, none of the MGNREGS worksite locations had a biometric attendance system. Compared with the total number of job cards, there were not many active job cards. Wage-related delays were perhaps to blame for this. The report also notes that the daily wage of Rs.229 is extremely low compared with the industrial wages in these areas.

The team also found that there was nothing "model" about a PMAY model colony: they had no concrete roads, water pipelines or compound walls. In one panchayat, 50 per cent of the beneficiaries of the housing scheme were listed as "unknown".

Applications for pensions under the NSAP in one village were rejected as applicants could not produce their BPL card numbers. In another gram panchayat, there was none at all who received old-age pension. A widow could not claim her pension as she did not have an Aadhaar card due to poor fingerprints. The CRM recommended the need to create awareness about these entitlements and periodic surveys to identify the aged, the widowed, the disabled, and the BPL beneficiaries.

> In the global Multidimensional Poverty Index, India ranks 62 among 107 countries.

According to the report, the availability of recent data for the identification of beneficiaries was a "major hurdle" because the Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) numbers were outdated and Mission Antyodaya (to identify the poorest of the poor) was ineffective.

In Jharkhand, the team found that a large number of people had yet to be covered under the PMAY scheme. It also recommended that pensions under the NSAP could be doubled from the current Rs.1,000 (Rs.800 from the Centre).

The team, however, lauded the Deen Dayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Rural Livelihoods Mission managed through SHGs. The advent of SHGs in tribal-dominated Jharkhand, it noted, had "brought smiles to the female population in the State".

In Nagaland, the CRM team found that entrepreneurial activities by SHGs were low because of lack of awareness of loan availability from banks and poor market linkages. Other issues of concern here were low MGNREGS wages (Rs.212) and low monthly pension rates of Rs.500 (Rs.300 from the Centre).

The team evaluated eight gram panchayats in two districts of Karnataka and found that the MGNREGS needed to have more average person-days than its current 45 days because it is "the lifeline of the rural people and pivotal in providing wage employment opportunities, especially in the lean agricultural seasons".

There was no awareness of Central pension schemes among beneficiaries and there was no social audit or redress of grievances in many places.

In Jammu and Kashmir, the team found there was a shortage of 50 lakh person-days in 2020-21 in the MGNREGS and that the wage rate of Rs.214 was "very meagre for [the] present living conditions and a lot lower than what was offered by private contractors which was Rs. 600-700".

NEED FOR EMPATHY

In its review of NSAP, the team found huge exclusion errors for old-age pension; the widow pension scheme did not cover women under 40 years and even the disbursement to beneficiaries was done once in three months. Allocations under the SECC had mainly gone to Jammu and there was no allocation for the last three years under the PMAY in the Kashmir division.

Other than for MGNREGS, no social audit of rural development programmes was conducted. Although there was convergence between the MGNREGS scheme and other department schemes, it was difficult to get permission from the forest department for any work.

"Given the geopolitical conditions and sensitivity of people on the issue of the withdrawal of Article 370, it is important to address the issues of concern to the people with empathy," the report says.

In the latest global Multidimensional Poverty Index figures released by the United Nations, India ranks 62 among 107 countries, only slightly better than a few of its South Asian neighbours. While identifying gaps and recommending better wages, pensions, and induction of regular and trained staff, the report fails to address budgetary inadequacies, which lie at the root of the problem.

In a country where the majority rely on informal forms of employment, the unequal distribution of productive assets needs to be addressed for poverty eradication. Even as ameliorative measures, the outreach and benefits of the existing rural development schemes are inadequate, as the CRM's review report shows. ☐

Fading sheen

In the 17 years since the Right to Information Act has come into existence, its users have been attacked, harassed, even murdered, as the machinery for its implementation has been severely weakened.

BY **ASHUTOSH SHARMA**

WHEN THE RIGHT TO INformation (RTI) Act came into force on October 12, 2005, it was hailed as the "sunshine law" which would make governments transparent and accountable besides empowering citizens through their enhanced participation in democratic processes. Sadly, the shine has since faded and public-spirited RTI users are a disillusioned lot today. Targeted attacks, threats, and false criminal cases are what they have to deal with now on a regular basis.

"Of all the risks and assaults what is most painful is the misnomer that RTI activists are 'blackmailers'," said Amra Ram, a 30-year-old RTI activist from Rajasthan's Barmer district. He faced a brutal assault in December 2021—his hands and legs were broken and pierced with nails. The provocation, according to reports, was his sustained work exposing corruption in projects granted under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in Kumpaliya panchayat. Almost one year after the attack on him, said Ram, "the police

DEATH PENALTY
The only Remedy.
POLITICAL
HEADEDNESS.
MODI STOP.
HOLLOW
SLOGAN
BACHAO'.
JUSTICE
FOR
DEATH
PENAL
THE ONLY
REMEDY
HANG THE
ULPRITS.

PTI/ S.IRFAN

MEMBERS OF J&K RTI MOVEMENT and local people protest in Srinagar against the rape and murder of the eight-year-old girl from Kathua in 2018.

are yet to nab half the accused persons”.

Kavita Srivastava, national president of the People’s Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), said: “Over the past 10 years, more than a dozen RTI activists have been brutally attacked in Rajasthan alone. And yet it is not an issue for political parties.”

According to Nikhil Dey, founding member of Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan and National Campaign for People’s Right to Information (NCPRI), more than 100 RTI users have been murdered all over India in the 17 years since the Act came into being.

Recently, Satark Nagrik Sangathan (SNS), a citizens’ group working to promote transparency and accountability in governance, released a report on the performance of Information Commissions. “The law has initiated the vital task of redistributing power in a democratic framework,” wrote Anjali Bhardwaj and Amrita Johri, activists associated with the SNS and NCPRI, in the report. An estimated 60 lakh RTI applications are filed in India annually, said the report.

“The (COVID-19) pandemic, coupled with high levels of unemployment and rising inflation, has made millions of families more dependent on the government for delivery of basic goods and services than ever before,” it pointed out.

INCREASING BACKLOG

The report reveals that at least two State Information Commissions (SIC)—Jharkhand and Tripura—were defunct as new commissioners have not been appointed upon the incumbents demitting office. Additionally, as many as four commissions were headless—the SICs of Manipur, Telangana, West Bengal, and Andhra Pradesh.

Maintaining that the backlog of appeals and complaints has been steadily increasing, the SNS study stated that 3,14,323 appeals and complaints were pending as on June 30, 2022, in the 26 Information Commissions. When it came to the average monthly disposal rate and pendency in commissions, the West Bengal SIC would take an estimated 24 years and 3 months to dispose a matter, the report stated. “In Odisha and Maharashtra SICs, estimated time for disposal is more than five years and in Bihar more than two years,” it said. Notably, the commissions did not impose penalties in 95 per cent of the cases where penalties were potentially imposable.

“The functioning of commissions is a major bottleneck in the effective implementation of the RTI law,” the report noted. “Large backlog of appeals and complaints in many commissions across the country have resulted in inordinate delays in disposal of cases, which render the law ineffective. Commissions have been found to be extremely reluctant to impose penalties on erring officials for violations of the law. Unfortunately, the transparency watchdogs themselves have not had a shining track record in terms of being transparent and accountable to the people of the country.”

In Jammu and Kashmir, official claims regarding clean and efficient governance after the revocation of the special status of the erstwhile State seem misplaced in the context of the RTI Act. Unlike the Central law, the repealed Jammu and Kashmir RTI Act, 2009, had provisions that mandated the SIC to decide RTI appeals within 60 to 120 days. “Under the Central Information Commission (CIC), disposal of appeals is taking an unusually long time,” said Raja Muzaffar Bhat, chairman and founder of J&K RTI Movement. “Since the Union Territory doesn’t have an SIC, all RTI appeals from UTs are listed before the CIC in New Delhi. My own RTI second appeal could be listed before the CIC early this year after 13 months,” he said.

Bhat said that with the revocation of Jammu and Kashmir’s special status, “the mindset of government officials too has changed since the J&K SIC has been shut down. Also, the government has not held any orientation programme or training workshop for its officers and citizens on the RTI Act 2005.”

> The SNS report stated that 3,14,323 appeals and complaints were pending as on June 30, 2022, in the 26 Information Commissions.

DEFAMATION CASES

Pradip Pradhan, national co-convener of NCPRI and convener of the Odisha Soochana Adhikar Abhijan (OSAA), a forum of RTI activists, said that to check growing activism, the Odisha Information Commission had filed defamation cases against two RTI activists in the civil court in Bhubaneswar. “The attack on RTI activists in Odisha is part of a well-thought-out plan to render the Act dysfunctional. The state machinery and mafias are working in tandem to tarnish their image and belittle their work,” Pradhan said. “Several RTI activists pay the price for their activism as they are subjected to humiliation, threats of arrest, and false and fabricated legal cases,” he added.

On March 27, 2021, Sarbeswar Behura, 52, a member of OSAA, was critically injured when bombs were hurled at his car. Rilu Behura, Sarbeswar’s wife, went to Dharmashala police station the next day along with Pradip Pradhan and RTI activists Srikant Pakal and Jitendra Sahu, to register a case, but the police refused and said they had registered a case on their own. “Behura has been attacked twice in the past. Though he filed FIRs, the police did not take any action,” Pradhan said.

Ram and Behura escaped with their lives. Many are not so fortunate. Ranjan Kumar Das of OSAA was murdered on January 31, 2020. In Madhya Pradesh, RTI activist Ran-

RTI
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Don't Amend the RTI Act!
DON'T C
आरटीआ कानून संशोधन
Save RTI-Save Democracy !!
RTI बचाओ लोकतंत्र बचाओ

MONEY SHARMA/AFP

A PROTEST MARCH against amendments to the RTI Act, in New Delhi in 2019.

jeet Soni was shot dead on June 2, 2022. Reportedly, he regularly sought information about government expenditure on infrastructure development, hospitals and welfare schemes. In Barmer, RTI activist Jagdish Goliya, 47, died in police custody in 2019 after he was arrested over a land dispute. "Though he had suffered serious internal injuries, he wasn't taken to hospital," said Kavita Srivastava. "Those who try to expose corruption end up being slapped with false police cases. But we hardly see any action against the perpetrators who threaten and harass RTI users," she added.

Regarding vindictive FIRs filed against RTI users, Justice (retired) Madan B. Lokur said: "In most cases, they are falsely booked under the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act or slapped with molestation charges. In such cases, it becomes difficult to get bail."

REDUCED POWER

Lokur said financial compensation should be provided in cases where RTI activists are murdered, attacked, or persecuted. Despite the Supreme Court's clear directions, the police often delay filing FIRs on receiving complaints from persecuted RTI activists, he pointed out. "Even in cases where FIRs are registered, action is rarely taken against the real conspirators. Only henchmen are prosecuted," he said.

Incidentally, the Whistle Blowers Protection Act, 2014, notified on May 12, 2014, has not been implemented so far. The law, according to the Union Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions, needs amendments to bar disclosures affecting sovereignty and integrity of India. Pradhan said that instead of waiting for the Centre to implement the Act, "State governments should bring in their own laws for the protection of whistle-blowers and their families."

Through the Draft RTI Rules 2017, the Narendra Modi government proposed that proceedings relating to an RTI query should automatically stop if the applicant dies during the pendency of an appeal before the CIC. "We fought against this proposal and didn't let it get implemented," said Dey.

Following the mysterious death of RTI activist Ravinder Balwani, the CIC had moved a resolution in 2011 that read: "If the Commission receives a complaint regarding assault or murder of an information seeker, it will examine the pending RTI applications of the victim and order the concerned Department(s) to publish the requested information suo motu on their website as per the provisions of law."

The resolution said governments must take steps for the protection of RTI users. "This resolution should be firmly implemented by the CIC and SICs. It will send out a message that the issues won't die down in case you kill an RTI user or one dies because of any other reason," Dey said.

Clearly, there is a strong need to strengthen the RTI law to fulfil its objectives. RTI crusaders feel that the opposite is happening. In 2019, the Right to Information (Amendment) Act was passed without any discussion in Parliament. The amendments not just undermined the position of the CIC and the SICs but also made them subservient to the government.

Commenting on the changes, social activist Aruna Roy accused the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party of weakening the RTI movement. "Amendments to the RTI in 2019 mark a watershed in successive governments' attempts to dilute the Act. The BJP government prevailed over citizens' resistance against weakening the law. It strategically reduced the power and independence of Central and State Information Commissions and brought both the bodies under its control," Roy said, adding, "The RTI movement continues. But the machinery for the implementation of the law has been weakened, severely diluting democratic practice in India."

On September 9, 2021, a group of 15 sitting and retired Information Commissioners wrote to the then Chief Justice of India (CJI), N.V. Ramana, complaining that High Courts were staying the orders of Information Commissioners. The letter requested CJI Ramana to direct the courts not to entertain pleas against orders passed by the CIC and SICs. Former Central Information Commissioner Shailesh Gandhi told *Frontline*: "The letter elicited zero response. The situation hasn't changed. And this is in violation of the [RTI] law."

On complaints regarding delayed responses to pleas concerning life and liberty issues (except sensitive criminal matters), where information is to be provided within 48 hours of receiving an application filed under Section 7 (1) of the RTI Act, Gandhi said: "Governments seem incapable of implementing the law." ☐

Feeling the heat

Climate scientists, for the first time, quantify the global economic burden of climate change to show how intense heat waves have disproportionately harmed low-income, low-emitting regions, while high-income countries that emit more greenhouse gases have lost relatively little. BY **R. RAMACHANDRAN**

THE LOSS TO THE GLOBAL economy between 1992 and 2013 because of climate change was between $5 trillion and $29.3 trillion, according to a recent estimate by two climate scientists, Christopher W. Callahan and Justin S. Mankin, from Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire, US. Their analysis shows that much of this loss was borne by low-income countries of tropical regions, which are not the primary drivers of human-induced global warming (Fig. 1). The analysis is based on a sample that covers 66 per cent of the world's population. The work was published in the October 28 issue of *Science Advances*.

Ironically, while these countries had a 6.7 per cent average reduction in national income, the richer nations, who are historically the greatest emitters of greenhouse gases and primarily responsible for anthropogenic global warming, experienced only a 1.5 per cent reduction. The analysis assumes significance in the context of the inclusion of "compensation to loss and damage" in the agenda of the ongoing COP27 at Sharm El Sheikh in Egypt and the contentious negotiations that are expected to ensue in the coming days on the issue.

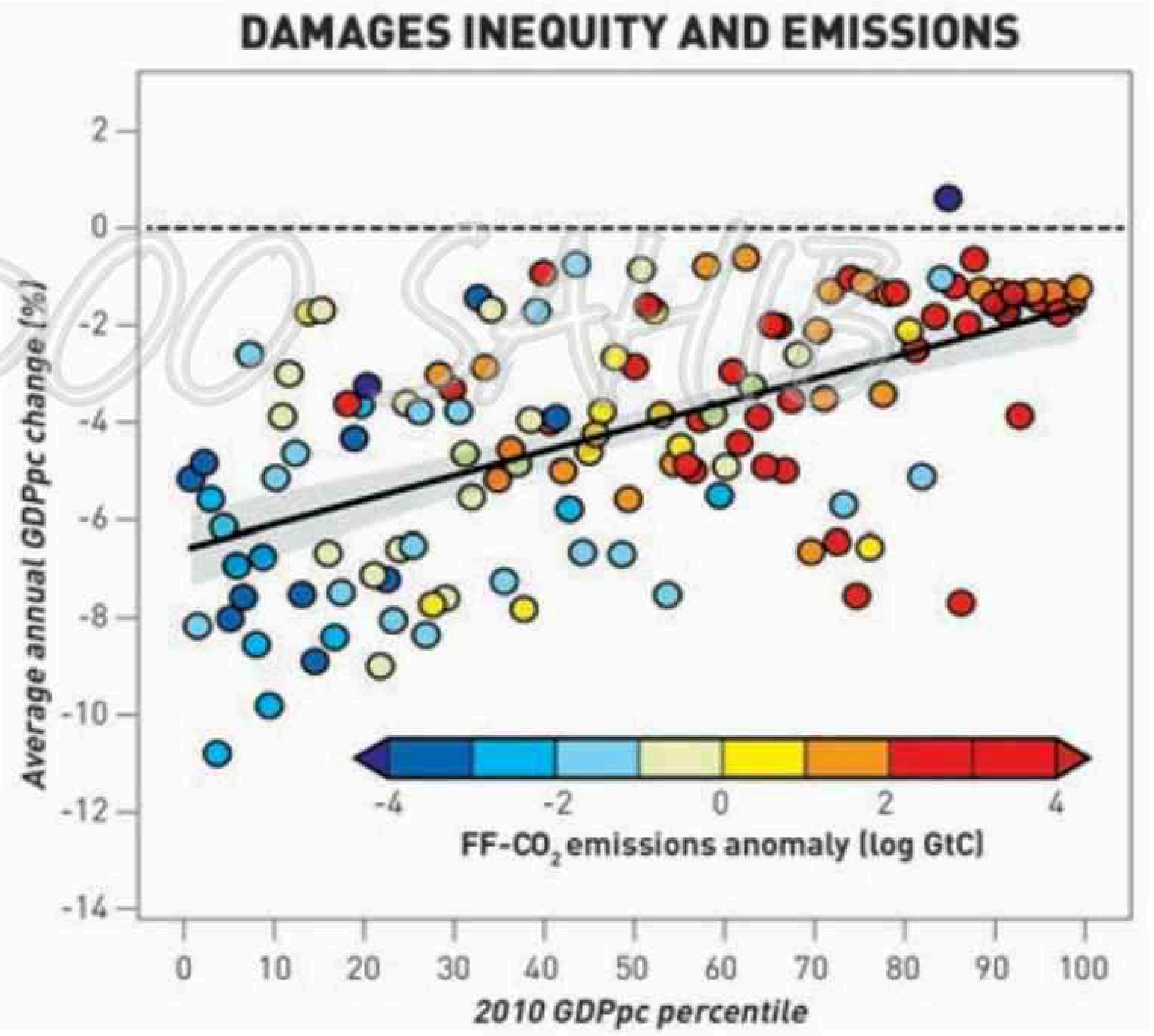

FIG. 1: Relationship between each country's 2010 GDP per capita percentile and the regional-average effect of anthropogenic changes to extreme heat in that country. The colours denote each country's fossil fuel CO_2 (FF-CO_2) emissions anomaly (difference between its log cumulative FF-CO_2 emissions and global mean log cumulative FF-CO_2 emissions). The colour bar units are the log of gigatons of carbon (GtC). The black line statistical fit to data with the 95 per cent confidence intervals shaded.

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Increased extreme heat, according to the authors, is one of the clearest impacts of global warming. The model that the researchers used combined extreme heat metrics measuring the temperature of the hottest five days (Tx5d) each year from 1992 to 2013 and an ensemble of climate models and subnational economic data to quantify the effect of extreme heat on economic growth globally. "Days that are very very hot are one of the most tangible ways that we feel climate change," Callahan told the journal *Nature*. "We know that they destroy crops, they reduce labour productivity, they cause more workplace injuries," he added.

Noting that the warmest regions of the earth, which also happen to be the poorest, were the first to experience changes in extreme temperatures as a result of global warming, the authors say that risks due to extreme heat are particularly acute in countries of these regions. Added to this is the fact that warmer years also tend to be drier and so it is a combined effect of low income and drought that influences the impact of extreme heat. "Because of their warmth," the authors point out, "tropical regions are at risk to cross physiological temperature thresholds for human morbidity and mortality. Moreover, lower incomes make tropical economies less able to adapt to increases in extreme heat. Even modest increases in mean temperatures can cause large increases in extremes. So increased heat extremes due to warming will stress adaptive capacities in the low-income regions that have contributed least to climate change."

FADEL SENNA/AFP

A HERD OF SHEEP on the cracked earth of Al Massira dam at a village some 140 km south of Morocco's economic capital, Casablanca, on August 8. The country is facing its worst drought in at least four decades.

AN EMPIRICAL GAP REMAINS

As the paper notes, despite the centrality of extreme heat in the overall impact of climate change, there has been practically no study quantifying the economic loss to nations globally because of it. Earlier studies in this direction, as the authors point out, were often sector or region specific. A theoretical and empirical gap still remains, says the paper, between the non-linearities identified at the local and sectoral level and the global assessment required to evolve appropriate climate change measures.

Also, attempts at bridging this gap have looked through the lens of changes in average temperature and temperature variability. However, as the authors point out, the physical processes driving average temperature and extreme temperatures are fundamentally different. While it is true that regions that are warmer tend to have both greater annual temperatures and extreme hot days, the analysis found that in the regions considered in the study anomalies in annual average temperatures explained only less than 13 per cent of the variation in the Tx5d values.

"Extreme heat events," say the authors, "are driven by atmospheric blocking events and land-atmosphere feedbacks, such as soil drying, which can amplify the anti-cyclonic circulation patterns required for multiday heat accumulation. These processes take place on characteristic daily-to-weekly time scales and have length scales associated with the synoptic or finer. While related, these processes are not the same as those that determine climatological quantities such as annual mean temperature."

According to them, climate change studies have shown that anthropogenic warming causes increased warming of the hottest days of the year more than it increases annual mean temperatures. This scientific reasoning has informed the authors' rationale for their approach: assessing the effects of the hottest few days of the year to fully quantify the costs of global warming.

The authors use the metric of the temperature of the hottest five-day period (Tx5d) in each year, which, according to them, captures the damaging multiday periods of extreme heat "while avoiding the arbitrary [temperature] thresholds used in other metrics". This time period of extreme heat, they argue, is consistent with the synoptic time scale of heat waves, which are generally driven by large-scale high-pressure systems that evolve on daily-to-weekly time scales associated with continental-scale atmospheric circulation.

Since they combine data from global climatological models, their empirical model includes the effects of both Tx5d and annual average

> Their work assumes significance in the context of the inclusion of "compensation to loss and damage" in the agenda of the ongoing COP27.

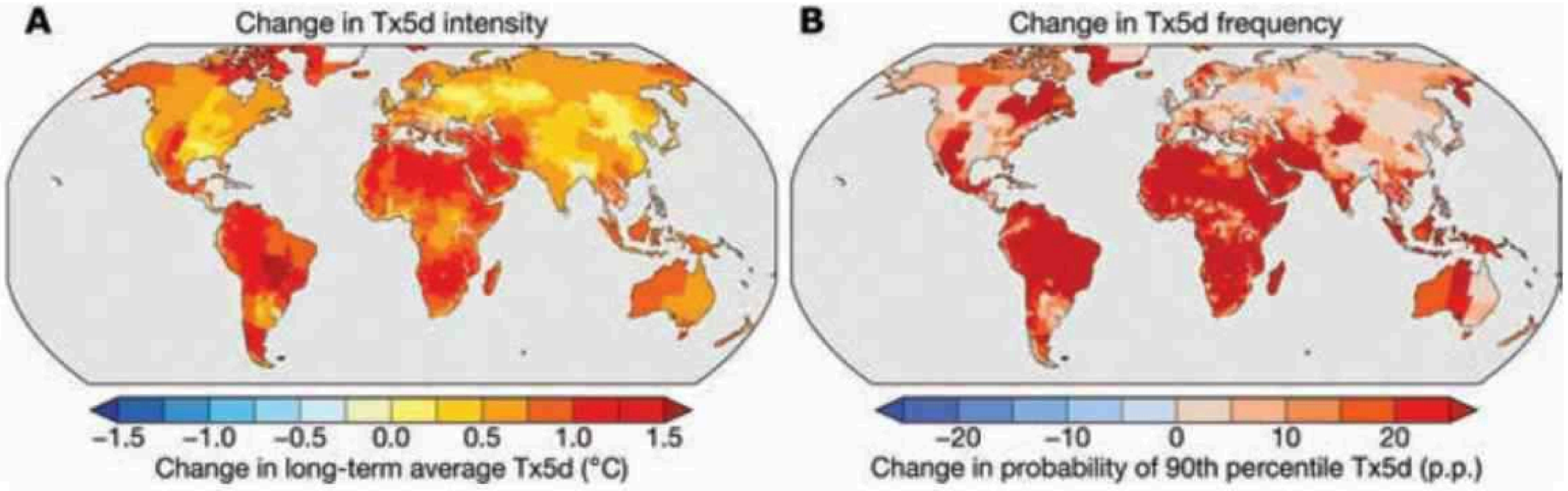
A
Change in Tx5d intensity
−1.5
−1.0
−0.5
0.0
0.5
1.0
1.5
Change in long-term average Tx5d (°C)
B
Change in Tx5d frequency
−20
−10
0
10
20
Change in probability of 90th percentile Tx5d (p.p.)

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FIG. 2: Anthropogenic changes in extreme heat. (A) Ensemble mean change in each region's average Tx5d (hottest five-day period) value between the observed and counterfactual climates estimated using CMIP6 (sixth phase of the Coupled Model Intercomparison Project) climate models. (B) Ensemble average change in the probability of each region's counterfactual 90th percentile Tx5d value between the observed and counterfactual climates. Increases in both quantities imply that the values are higher in the observed climates than in the counterfactual climate.

temperature, and their interaction allows the effects of extremes to vary with average temperature and temperature variability, according to the authors. This, they say, allows the model to account for the heterogeneity in the effect of extreme heat and for the consequent differing responses of different regions on the basis of their annual average temperatures. Therefore, the researchers have inferred the effects of extreme heat for all regions on the basis of average temperatures data. The sample that was included for the estimate spans regions with average temperatures exceeding 30 °C and included tropical countries such as Brazil, Indonesia, and India.

The results of the analysis have shown that there is significant independence in the way both average and extreme temperatures affect a given region. The research found that while increases in average temperatures have a weakly positive effect in cold regions, they have increasingly harmful effects in warmer regions. This additional effect arises because of the interaction between warmer average temperatures and increased extreme heat intensity during the warmest part of the year.

For regions where economic data are not available, which are mostly poor countries in warm regions, assessing the economic impact of extreme heat conditions is based on an assumed latitudinal structure of responses to such conditions: tropical regions lose income significantly when there is an increase in extreme temperatures, mid-latitude regions in places in the US and southern Europe are weakly impacted transition zones, and high-latitude regions gain economically as they are too cold for optimal growth. This extrapolation procedure, the authors admit, is a key limitation of their analysis. "Gathering additional economic data in the regions most prone to climate impacts given their geography and income is an important focus for better attribution of climate impacts and therefore management of future climate risks," they write.

THE AUTHORS' APPROACH

To summarise the authors' approach, estimating the economic impact of anthropogenic extreme heat requires three things: (i) the effect of extreme heat on economic growth; (ii) anthropogenic changes in extreme heat; and (iii) continuous GDP per capita data. The empirical model the authors used provided the first. To estimate the second, they used historical and natural climate model experiments from the sixth phase of the Coupled Model Intercomparison Project to calculate "counterfactual" Tx5d (Fig. 2). For the third, to ensure the availability of continuous per capita GDP data, they used a statistical model to infer regional per capita GDP time series over 1992-2013 for regions where they were not available.

The frequency and intensity of extreme heat events due to anthropogenic warming increased globally during 1992-2013, but the spatial pattern is heterogeneous, increasing most strongly in the tropics (Fig. 2). On average, regional Tx5d values have increased by 0.77 °C more than they would have without warming, with increases of more than 1°C in much of the tropics but less than 0.5 °C in the US and Europe (Fig. 2A). The probability of extreme Tx5d values (the 90th percentile in each region calculated from the counterfactual time series) has also substantially increased, with probabilities across regions rising by 13 percentage points on average, and even more intensely across South America, Africa, and West Asia (Fig. 2B). In contrast, the probabilities of 90th percentile Tx5d values have risen less than 5 percentage points, or even decreased, in much of the mid latitudes.

Figure 3 shows the unequal economic effects of extreme heat caused by anthropogenic changes. In tropical countries such as Brazil, Venezuela, and Mali, the per capita GDP was lower by more than 5per cent a year than it would have been otherwise. In high-latitude nations such as Canada and Finland, anthropogenic extreme heat changes

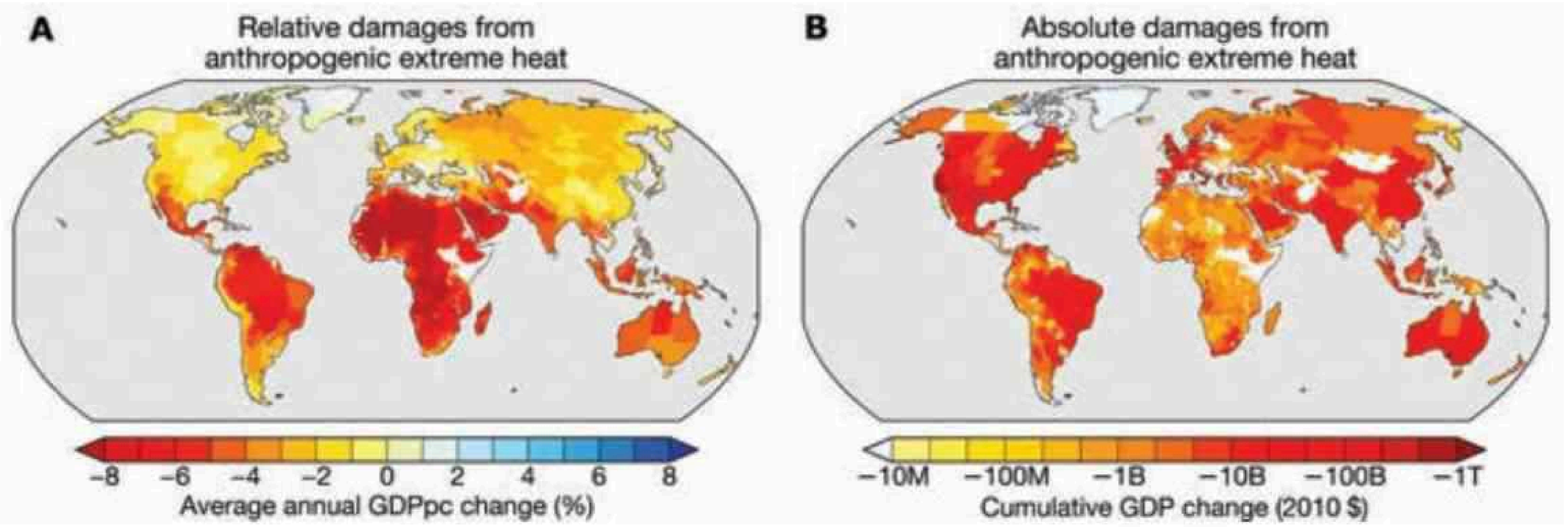
A
Relative damages from anthropogenic extreme heat
−8
−6
−4
−2
0
2
4
6
8
Average annual GDPpc change (%)
B
Absolute damages from anthropogenic extreme heat
−10M
−100M
−1B
−10B
−100B
−1T
Cumulative GDP change (2010 $)

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FIG. 3: Unequal economic effects of anthropogenic changes to extreme heat intensity. (A) Average annual change in regional per capita GDP (GDPpc) owing to anthropogenic changes in Tx5d intensity during 1992-2013. (B) Cumulative 1992-2013 change in regional GDP in 2010 US dollars owing to anthropogenic changes in Tx5d intensity.

lowered the per capita GDP only by about 1 per cent a year. The cumulative loss in the average Brazilian region during 1992-2013 was $39 billion (2010-equivalent dollars), which is more than half of its 2010 GDP, and $6.5 billion in the average Indonesian region, which is over 44 per cent of its 2010 GDP. Many high-income countries have lost little in relative terms but tens of billions in absolute terms due to their large economies.

BHADOO SAHAB

Since low-income countries have higher baseline temperatures and lower temperature variability, these regions both experience the signal of extreme heat from warming first and suffer most when extreme heat increases. “However,” write the authors, “the inequality of climate change extends to its causes, not just its effects. Rich countries that experience limited damage are also large emitters of fossil fuel carbon dioxide (FF-CO$_2$), making them primarily responsible for increases in global temperatures and associated heat extremes. Given the strong relationship between cumulative CO$_2$ emissions and changes in local temperature extremes, high-emitting nations can be considered directly responsible for a large fraction of warming-induced heat extremes and, by extension, the income losses suffered by individual regions.”

In sum, therefore, this first-ever quantitative analysis on the global economic burden of climate change has highlighted the following: (i) Increased extreme heat intensity has caused economic losses greatly in relatively warm tropical regions and weakly in relatively cool mid-latitude regions; (ii) human-driven global warming has increased the frequency and intensity of these heat extremes; and (iii) the effects of climate change on extreme heat have amplified underlying inequality, disproportionately harming low-income, low-emitting regions, with the historically major emitters being primarily responsible for billions of dollars of losses in the tropics. The authors add that their estimates are conservative because, for reasons of simplicity and clarity, they focussed only on the peak intensity of extreme heat, and multiple periods of extreme heat can have compounding and non-linear effects, which would enhance the effect of extreme heat.

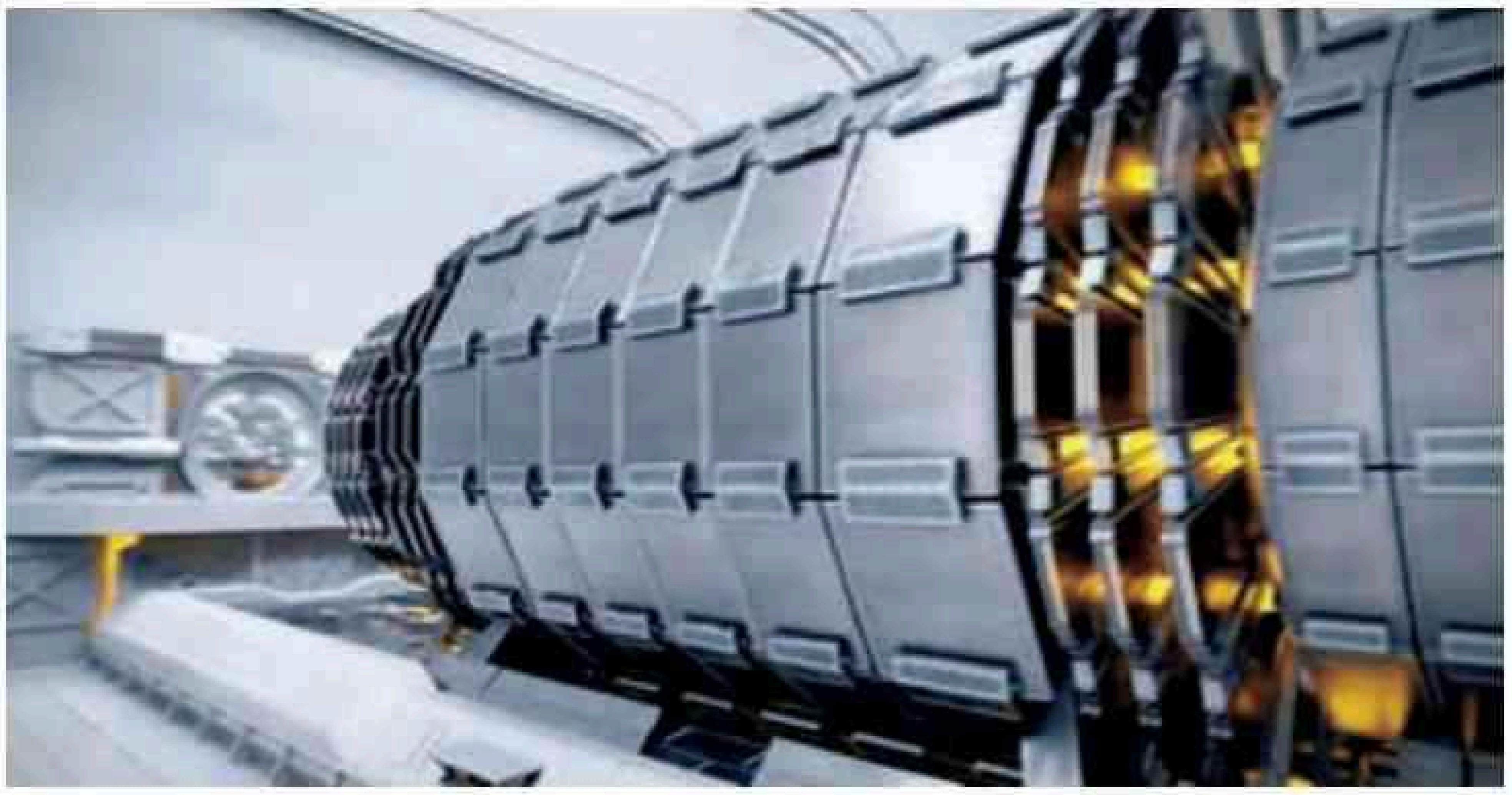
BEHAVIOURIAL ADAPTATIONS

Even though many adaptations have been undertaken to deal with hot conditions even without climate change, the authors have emphasised that people are poorly adapted to deal with extreme heat. While in high-income regions, this includes air conditioning of indoor spaces and a move towards to service-dominated economies, in low-income regions it is more behavioural, such as resting in the shade, drinking more water, and shifting to non-outdoor labour. “However,” the authors point out, “there are physiological thresholds for extreme heat exposure in people and agriculture, which challenge the efficacy of behavioural adaptations.”

Their work, in effect, shows that current adaptations have not been successful in combating impacts of effects of extreme heat. The findings, they hope, will inform the way in which region-specific strategies to combat the effects of climate change are obtained, and they have stressed the need for more such adaptation investments alongside climate mitigation. “The fact that we were able to pinpoint this effect of five hottest days of the year on the whole year, as economic effects, implies that these few days have really outsized effects,” Callahan told *Nature*. “So investments targeted at mitigating the effects of heat extremes in the hottest parts of the year could deliver major economic returns,” he added.

The study also has brought out clearly the responsibility of rich countries to pay their share. The journal also quoted Erich Fischer of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich as saying: “Given the unequal burden and the share of historical emissions... the global north needs to support the global south in terms of coping with these adverse effects.” One hopes that words to this effect ring loud and clear among the nations at COP27 as it begins to discuss “compensations to loss and damage”. □

Green particle accelerators?



POLAR MEDIA/CERN

FUTURE PARTICLE COLLIDERS will produce many Higgs bosons so that researchers can probe the particle's physics.

THERE are many designs on the table for the next-generation super collider. All of them are billed as "Higgs factories" because, as the particle physicist Caterina Vernieri, one of the members of the international Higgs Study group, wrote: "Clearly, one of the main experimental milestones for the post-LHC [Large Hadron Collider] landscape is the study of the Higgs boson that has the potential to shed light on a number of fundamental challenges in modern physics. The Higgs boson is one of the central elements in the future of collider physics."

At the LHC, at CERN, Higgs bosons are produced only rarely. Physicists now want Higgs factories dedicated to churning out the particles in the hope that studying them in precise detail will lead to exciting discoveries. In a recently published work in *The European Physical Journal Plus*, the physicists P. Janot of CERN and A. Blondel of the University of Geneva calculated the energy consumption of five proposed Higgs factories and found that there was an enormous difference in the energy consumption of these designs and hence to their carbon footprint.

They looked at CERN's Future Circular Collider (FCC), China's Circular Electron Positron Collider (CEPC), and three proposed linear colliders: Japan's Linear Collider, CERN's Compact Linear Collider, and the US' Cool Copper Collider (C^3). The least-polluting option, the study found, was the FCC. According to them, it would use one-sixth the energy of the most polluting alternative, the C^3. "It makes sense to look at energy consumption per Higgs boson because the ability to do science is directly related to the number of Higgs bosons produced," said Janot. Circular and linear colliders tend to have a similar annual energy consumption, but circular ones generate Higgs bosons faster and can therefore meet the same science goals in a shorter time.

According to the study, the FCC would use 3 megawatt hours of electricity per Higgs boson produced and the CEPC 4.1 MWh. Linear machines performed worse, with C^3 being the least energy-efficient at 18 MWh per boson. But the calculated carbon footprints could "change dramatically" as countries expand access to renewable power, noted Wang Yifan, director of the Institute of High Energy Physics of the Chinese Academy of Sciences in Beijing. If more than 90 per cent of the electricity at CERN is sourced from carbon-free sources, the FCC's carbon footprint would be just 1 per cent of the most polluting alternative, says the study.

How soap solution moves on water

WHEN a tiny drop of soapy water falls on a pool of liquid, its contents spread out over the pool's surface. The dynamics of this spreading depends on the local concentration of soap at each point across the entire pool's surface. But this varies in time, and its spread over the water surface is difficult to predict. Thomas Bickel of the University of Bordeaux in Talence and François Detcheverry of the University of Lyon (both in France) have now derived an exact time-dependent solution for these distributions. The solution revealed surprisingly rich behaviour in this everyday phenomenon. The work was published in a recent issue of *Physical Review E*.

The duo considered a surfactant-laden drop spreading over the surface of a deep pool of fluid. (A surfactant, or surface-active agent, is a substance such as soap that, when added to a liquid, reduces its surface tension, thereby increasing its spreading and wetting properties.) Earlier research showed that the transport of surfactant particles could be described by Burgers' equation, which describes flows in turbulent fluids.

The researchers solved Burgers' equation for their system for different initial conditions. They found that the time dependence of the spread was sensitive to the surfactant's initial distribution on the pool's surface, such that the higher the initial concentration, the quicker the spread. Also, the spreading of surfactants over a liquid surface does not always match what is expected for a simple diffusion process as other researchers had suggested earlier. Rather, the duo said, it is a rich and complex phenomenon. The duo hoped that experiments would bear out their predictions.

Allergens in your ‘natural’ personal care products

Allergic contact dermatitis on the eyelids
Allergic contact dermatitis on the hands

JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION NETWORK

CONTACT DERMATITIS on eyelids and hands.

ACCORDING to a Research Letter in a recent issue of *JAMA Dermatology*, soaps, lotions, and fragrances that are advertised as “clean” and “natural” may cause skin issues, such as contact allergic dermatitis. Researchers at Stanford University School of Medicine compiled ingredients from natural personal care products (NPCPs) sold online at three major retailers: Target, Walgreens, and Whole Foods Market. These were cross-referenced with the 191 contact allergens in the Contact Allergen Management Program database of the American Contact Dermatitis Society.

According to the study, of the 1,651 NPCPs the researchers looked at, only about 6 per cent had no contact allergens. The remaining 94 per cent had at least one contact allergen, and about 90 per cent contained one or more contact allergens from among the 100 allergens that most frequently cause positive reactions. The average number of contact allergens in each product was 4.5. The study identified 73 unique allergens, appearing 7,487 times on ingredient lists. The authors suggest that clinicians should educate patients about the effect of chemicals on skin, such as irritation and allergic reactions, and tell them that even personal products advertised as containing “natural” ingredients, including plant extracts, can contain contact allergens.

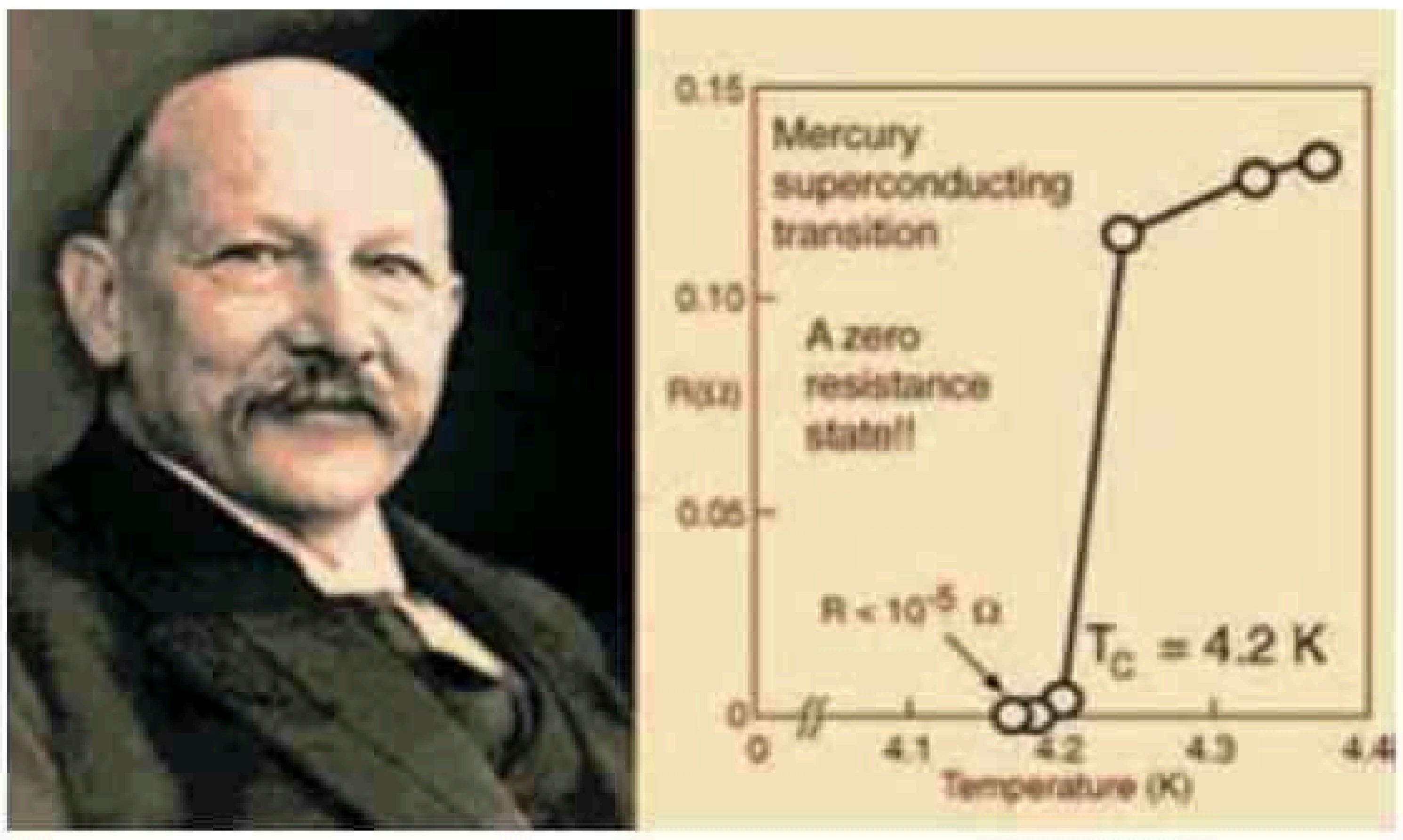
The authors also noted that the US Food and Drug Administration had not defined clean or natural, which allowed sellers to freely advertise using these terms in a bid to convey the impression of safety and health benefits to consumers.

This is true of India, too, where there is no regulation on such advertisements and, with the increase in the use of cosmetics, such products are sold widely.

Mercury superconductivity understood, finally

THEORISTS have finally explained the superconductivity of mercury, the first superconductor ever discovered. In 1911, three years after he invented the method to liquefy helium to 4 degrees kelvin (about –269 °C), the Dutch physicist Heike Kamerlingh Onnes succeeded in cooling mercury down to 4.2 K using liquid helium. He passed current through mercury wire and found that its electrical resistance vanished at 4.2 K. He wrote: “The experiment left no doubt about the disappearance of the resistance of mercury. Mercury has passed into a new state, which because of its extraordinary electrical properties may be called the superconductive state.”

Although mercury was later found to be a “conventional” superconductor, no microscopic theory managed to fully explain the metal’s behaviour or predict the temperature at which it becomes a superconductor (critical temperature). To tackle the problem of this incomplete understanding, Gianni Profeta of the University of L’Aquila, Italy, and colleagues scrutinised all physical properties relevant to conventional superconductivity. Their first-principles calculations accurately predicted mercury’s critical temperature. The work was published in the latest issue of *Physical Review B*. Their prediction of critical temperature was only 2.5 per cent lower than the experimental value. The new understanding of the oldest superconductor may offer valuable lessons for superconductivity research, said Profeta.



MSE-5317 WIKIDOT

HEIKE KAMERLINGH ONNES and his 1911 plot showing vanishing resistance at 4.2 K.

By identifying theoretical caveats, the work has provided insights relevant to searches for room-temperature superconductors. A promising material-by-design approach in the search for superconductivity in ambient conditions involves “high-throughput” computations that screen millions of theoretical material combinations. “If we don’t include subtle effects similar to those relevant for mercury, these computations may overlook many interesting materials or err in their critical temperature predictions by hundreds of kelvins,” Profeta said.

Compiled by **R. Ramachandran**

Child-friendly cops

In a new initiative in southern Tamil Nadu, the police augment their role to ensure that child sexual abuse survivors receive legal help, counselling, protection, and compensation. BY **ILANGOVAN RAJASEKARAN**

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE CASES have shown an increase in Tamil Nadu, according to National Crime Records Bureau statistics. The State ranks fourth in the country for crimes against children, particularly girls, and the NCRB data show that 4,469 cases were filed under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act in the State in 2021, up from 3,090 cases in 2020.

Many of these cases have been pending for years in Special Mahila Courts, which also hear POCSO cases, and the conviction rate in such cases has been low. Only recently were judgments issued in cases filed in 2014.

The majority of the survivors are from poor rural households whose parents migrate to far-off places in search of work leaving their children in the care of aged grandparents or older siblings. Most sexual predators are neighbours and relatives.

For instance, the seven-year-old girl who was burned to death in July after being raped lived with her grandmother in Theni while her mother worked as a daily labourer in Salem. The girl was playing near the anganwadi where her grandmother worked as an ayah when she was abducted and sexually assaulted by a 20-year-old neighbour. He then set her ablaze.

She was taken to the Government Rajaji Medical College Hospital in Madurai, 75 kilometres away, but died a month later. In her dying declaration to the Judicial Magistrate, Bodinaickanur, Theni district, she named the neighbour, who was then arrested under Sections 9 (m) and 10 of the POCSO Act read with Section 302 (murder) of the Indian Penal Code. He was also detained under the Goondas Act that effectively prevented him from seeking bail. Of late, the Goondas Act has been applied in such cases to prevent bail to the accused.

In another incident, near Andipatti in Theni, a 16-year-old girl with impaired speech and hearing was raped by two neighbourhood men, one of them a juvenile. Her widowed mother and younger brother were away at the time of the crime.

THE MAJORITY OF the survivors of child sexual abuse cases are from poor rural families where the parents migrate to far-off places in search of work, leaving children in the care of aged grandparents or older siblings.

POLICE INITIATIVE

Theni accounts for 153 of the more than 500 cases registered under the POCSO Act this year in the 11 southern districts of Tamil Nadu. The police in these districts are alive to the problem and have recently adopted a conscientious way of prioritising such cases while ensuring a caring and civilised approach towards the survivors. The initiative, which came from South Zone Inspector General of Police Asra Garg, goes beyond the police's enforcement mandate and involves a comprehensive bundle of assistance that includes legal intervention, sustained counselling, prolonged protection, and rehabilitation of survivors and their families.

A charter of 15 commandments guides the actions of the special cells established for the purpose in every district. Once an incident comes to their notice, the cells take charge of protection of the survivor and her family, ensure immediate medical examination of the survivor at a government hospital, and arrange counselling and consultation for her psychological well-being. A female police officer records a statement at the child's convenience.

The cell also provides assistance as recommended by child welfare committees and, above all, ensures protection for the survivor from the accused, including during trial.

"We have been creating awareness among girls and their parents about such incidents of violence while simultaneously pursuing the cases legally," said P. Usha, Theni District All Women Police Station Inspector, a member of the district's special team.

On the legal front, the police keep a close watch on the progress of the cases, besides assisting survivors to get interim and final compensation under the Tamil Nadu Victim Compensation Fund for POCSO cases. "Each policeman/policewoman in these teams in each district [in the south zone] is sensitised and works in tandem with legal officers, counsellors, and district child health officers to maximise the benefits of our intervention," Garg told *Frontline*.

"We ensure that the survivors and their family members are well aware of their legal rights," he said.

Many criminals get away because the girls are from poor and socially disadvantaged families who are unaware of legal procedures. "The initiative helps complainants follow up on the cases, which we hope will result in an enhanced conviction rate, instilling fear among perpetrators and paving the way for an eventual reduction of crimes against children," Garg said.

THE PROCESS

The procedures involve a printed Form A, issued to the complainant, containing the first information report (FIR) and other administrative details, and a Form B that has an Initial Assessment Report by the Investigating Officer. Within 24 hours of filing the FIR, the Form B is sent to the child welfare committee.

"All this is done without compromising the secrecy of the complainants and their families," Garg said. "The child welfare committee provides counselling to the survivors. We help them get all assistance such as interim and final compensation through courts without delay. Compensation in four cases has been obtained in Theni district alone, and about 100 cases are pending before various courts in other southern districts. We are tracking them all."

ASRA GARG, Inspector General of Police, South Zone, Tamil Nadu. Police personnel in special cells work in tandem with legal officers, counsellors, and district child health officers, he says.

In July, the Theni Special Court for Women awarded an interim compensation of Rs.3 lakh to the family of the seven-year-old victim in Theni. The court ordered that Rs.2 lakh be paid immediately to meet expenses. The speech and hearing impaired survivor was given an interim compensation of Rs.1 lakh.

PLUGGING LOOPHOLES

Theni Superintendent of Police Praveen Dongare told *Frontline* that they were able to get compensation in 11 days. "This is an initiative that plugs loopholes in the system. During court hearings, we inform the survivors or complainants via WhatsApp or SMS. Whenever the accused move the bail petition, the complainant's parents and families are alerted in writing about the date of the bail hearing. This enables them to appear in person and oppose bail, giving them a say in deciding the bail plea," he said.

> The initiative is not just a police station procedure but acknowledges survivors and families as central to the delivery of justice.

In a POCSO case involving two juveniles in Thoothukudi district, bail for the male juvenile was denied after the Thoothukudi Rural Assistant Commissioner of Police A.V. Chandeesh appeared before the Juvenile Justice Board and argued against it on the grounds that investigation was ongoing and the survivor's statement had to be recorded. The survivor's mother was briefed, counselled, and brought before the Board as per 439 (1A) of the Criminal Procedure Code when the bail petition was heard.

The initial response to the "Garg Initiative", as law enforcers in the south zone call it, appears to be positive. It has started showing encouraging results in the districts of Theni, Tirunelveli, Tenkasi, Thoothukudi, and Kanyakumari, where it is being implemented on an experimental basis. "Since it is working well, we have decided to expand it to other districts in the south zone, fine-tuning it further with some modifications," Garg said.

Vidya Reddy of Tulir, Centre for the Prevention and Healing of Child Sexual Abuse, a non-governmental organisation that has been playing a proactive role in intervention and rehabilitation processes in cases of child sexual abuse, told *Frontline* that the move was not just a police station's usual "ticking the box" procedure without thought or sensitivity. The initiative, she agreed, acknowledged survivors and their families as central to the delivery of justice. "Enabling them is a critical aspect of their journey towards healing," she said.

Reddy also pointed to the importance of recognising the role of other stakeholders and the assistance given to families to pursue the cases and see them through. "The initiative not only disseminates information about their entitlements, including the support persons who can help them, but ensures that the complainant and the families know their rights about bail applications as well as how to apply for compensation," she said. □

A gentle revolutionary

Ela Bhatt (1933-2022) will be remembered not just for SEWA but also for the quality of her leadership. BY **KALPANA SHARMA**

ELA BHATT, OR ELABEN AS she was known to all, will be remembered not only for establishing a "union", a literal coming together of millions of poor women, or for the dozens of awards she received, or for the policy changes she helped initiate nationally and internationally, but also for the quality of leadership she exemplified.

On November 2, the founder of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) passed away in Ahmedabad after a brief illness at the age of 89.

It is for a reason that Elaben has been called "the gentle revolutionary". For even as she fought fiercely for the recognition of millions of self-employed women as workers and contributors to the economy, in her personal dealings with people she remained gentle, open to new ideas, and untouched by the personal recognition she had received in over five decades of her work.

THE BEGINNING

Few will dispute that what Elaben began, by setting up a union of home-based and self-employed women in Ahmedabad in 1972, was revolutionary. Born in Surat, and trained as a lawyer, she joined in 1955 the Majdoor Mahajan Sangh (the Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association) established by Anasuya Sarabhai and Mahatma Gandhi in 1920. She headed its women's wing but soon realised that the women street vendors, home-based garment workers, and cart-pullers she met wanted recognition and their own organisation. There was no place for them in established trade unions.

In response to their needs, Elaben established SEWA in 1972. Soon the women spoke of their need to control what they earned and to find avenues to borrow so that they could grow their businesses and meet emergency needs. Banks would not give such women the time of day. Thus, the idea of a bank was born, and in 1974, SEWA established a bank that allowed women to save even small amounts, often on a daily basis, and to borrow. It is on the basis of this simple concept that the world of microfinance emerged. But the beginning was rooted in a woman like Ela Bhatt listening to these unrecognised women workers and finding a way to change their lives.

> SEWA has grown and expanded in ways that Elaben perhaps would not have envisaged when she set it up.

SEWA's work of organising women in the informal economy has also brought visibility to women workers, who were otherwise literally invisible to economists and data collectors. The report of the National Commission on Self-Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector, or "Shramshakti", released in 1989, was an important landmark in this effort and Elaben was central to it.

Apart from organising the women and establishing a bank to help them save and borrow, Elaben and her colleagues in SEWA also saw the importance of changing laws so that these women workers would be able to conduct their trade without being harassed. As a Rajya Sabha member from 1986-89, followed by a stint in the Planning Commission from 1989-91, Elaben pushed for a law to protect the rights of street vendors. Finally in 2013, Parliament passed the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Bill. The law sets down norms for street vending and protects vendors from arbitrary eviction or fines. For the millions of urban poor across India, whose only source of livelihood is street vending, this recognition has been a lifesaver. Unfortunately, many local governments continue to violate the law.

For their work, SEWA and

V. SUDERSHAN

Elaben have received national and international recognition. In 1984, they were awarded the Right Livelihood Award, often referred to as the alternative Nobel Prize. Elaben has also been the recipient of the Niwano Peace Prize, the Magsaysay Award, the Padma Bhushan, and the Indira Gandhi International Prize for Peace. In 2007, she was invited to join The Elders Foundation for peace and human rights set up by Nelson Mandela.

My own appreciation of the importance of the work done by Elaben and SEWA grew during a reporting trip to Ahmedabad in 1985. We were a group of women journalists from different news organisations who decided to visit the city together in the wake of the anti-reservation protests that morphed into communal violence. To understand the problems that women, especially poor women, faced during these riots, we sought out women living in the crowded inner city. These were mostly home-based workers or street vendors. Many were members of SEWA. Yet, no one from the local media had spoken to them. They told us how the rioting followed by long spells of curfew had crippled their work.

The tools of their trade, such as sewing machines, were destroyed when their homes were attacked. Curfew prevented them from taking their finished goods out of the inner city or collecting the raw materials. When the rioting ended, SEWA had to step in to ensure that these women got compensation for loss of income and damage as the officials failed to recognise them as workers.

SEWA celebrated its 50 years of existence last year, and fortunately, its founder was around for the celebrations. However, it is not just the longevity of the organisation that is notable but also the way it is managed and how it has grown.

COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

In India, when a charismatic individual sets up an organisation, their presence often dwarfs others. Elaben's was a giant presence in SEWA. But, as those who have been running the organisation for several decades will confirm, not only did she step back officially in 1996 as SEWA's secretary general, but she nurtured and trusted the collective leadership that ran SEWA.

As a result, the organisation has grown and expanded in ways that she perhaps would not have envisaged when she established it in 1972. From starting as an urban-based organisation, SEWA also works in rural areas. Apart from savings and credit, it has extended its services to cover health care, childcare, insurance, legal services, and housing.

In a country where everything from politics to business revolves around big personalities, Elaben's leadership style went against this norm. Although her name will always remain inextricably linked with the organisation she founded, we should salute her for providing this rare quality of leadership that is so desperately needed. ☐

Kalpana Sharma is a Mumbai-based independent journalist and columnist.

Towards all-round growth

Through numerous welfare projects and schemes, the government of Jharkhand under Chief Minister Hemant Soren has been focusing on better governance, with special emphasis on education and job creation.

POVERTY ALMOST FORCED REEMA TO QUIT school and give up on her ambition of becoming a doctor. Staring at a bleak future of continued hardship and broken dreams, Reema's future was saved by the Kishori Samridhi Yojana, launched by the government of Jharkhand to facilitate the education of girls. The scheme, which offers financial assistance up to Rs.40,000 (subject to eligibility and fulfilment of conditions), is expected to benefit around nine lakh girls in the State.

Reema said: "My father is very poor and his financial condition acts as a deterrent to my education. Under the Savitribai Phule Kishori Samridhi Yojana I will receive Rs.2,500 in class 9 and Rs.5,000 in class 10, which will be significant in securing my future. It will help me fulfill my goal—which is to be a doctor."

Through its numerous welfare projects and schemes, the government of Jharkhand, under the watchful eye of Chief Minister Hemant Soren, has been focussing on all-round growth and development, with special emphasis on education and job creation.

SCHOLARSHIP FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

Apart from the Savitribai Phule Kishori Samridhi Yojana, another important project in the education sector is the Marang Gomke Jaipal Singh Munda Overseas Scholarship, which encourages the pursuit of higher education, particularly among members of the Scheduled Tribes (ST), Scheduled Castes (SC), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and the minorities.

किशोरी समृद्धि योजना

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

CHIEF MINISTER HEMANT SOREN with a beneficiary of the Kishori Samridhi Yojana.

The government of Jharkhand has also signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the United Kingdom government to facilitate higher education of the youth in the most eminent universities of England. The State government has entered into a "one of a kind knowledge partnership" with the UK—the Chevening Marang Gomke Jaipal Singh Munda Scholarship.

Akanksha Mary Balmuchu, a student pursuing higher studies, said that this step taken by the State government would be a "great opportunity for us to represent our culture on a global platform and also represent the true and actual meaning of the phrase, 'unity in diversity'....[I am] grateful to the government as they thought of taking this step, empowering and encouraging students to pursue more in their life."

EMPLOYMENT GENERATION

Not only is the government of Jharkhand actively pushing the growth of education, it is also encouraging the youth of the State to be financially independent and self-reliant. The Chief Minister Employment Generation Programme (CMEGP) is one such measure initiated by the Chief Minister to provide empowerment through entrepreneurship to the youth.

Under the programme, loans up to Rs.25 lakh are provided (subject to fulfilment of eligibility). Already, the CMEGP has benefited 8,602 youths so far.

Sanam Oraon is one such young man who received a loan of Rs.20 lakh from CMEGP to start his own business. “I have used this amount to set up a brick kiln, a step I took for self-employment. I wish to convey to the youth of the State that they should make full use of the opportunities that are being given by the Hon’ble Chief Minister,” said Sanam.

Another youth, named Mohan Tudu, who received Rs.25,000 under the CMEGP, said: “I am very enthusiastic and happy about this. I wish to extend my gratitude towards Chief Minister Hemant Sorenji.”

PENSION SCHEMES

Just as the government is watchful of the future of the younger generation, it is also committed to protecting the old and the helpless through its pension schemes like the Sarvajan Pension Yojana and the Old Pension Scheme. For the first time after Jharkhand attained Statehood on November 15, 2000, all eligible beneficiaries are getting the benefits of the Sarvajan Pension Yojana regardless of any capping.

जो कहते हैं वो करते हैं
सर्वजन पेंशन योजना

BENEFICIARIES of the State government’s pension scheme.

THE STATE CABINET has approved the “Local Resident of Jharkhand Bill” with the aim to define the “local” population, basing 1932 as the cut-off year.

The Sarvajan Pension Yojana has been successful in linking thousands of senior citizens, widows, destitute women, divyangjans (physically handicapped), primitive tribes, and HIV and AIDS victims. The pension is credited by the 5th of every month. The below poverty line (BPL) criterion earlier necessary to qualify for the benefit has also been scrapped.

Ardhan Kudada, a beneficiary of the scheme, said: “I had tried to avail myself of the benefits of the pension scheme for years, but all efforts were in vain. I am 65 now, and it is finally due to Chief Minister Shri Hemant Soren that I have been granted a pension. He has been a saviour for senior citizens like me. I extend my heartfelt thanks to him.”

The Old Pension Scheme of the State has also been restored, much to the delight of government employees of Jharkhand. According to a statement by the State government, “Restoration of the Old Pension Scheme is not just the delivery of the key poll promise but also a reflection of the Chief Minister’s commitment to better serve those who serve the State.”

AAPKI SARKAR AAPKE DWAR

One of the ways the Jharkhand government is ensuring proper governance to all its citizens, is through the relaunch of the two-phased Aapki Yojana Aapki Sarkar Aapke Dwar (Your Schemes, Your Government at Your Door) programme.

The programme, which has been implemented across various districts, guarantees delivery of select welfare schemes at the doorstep of residents, and also offers solutions to problems, redressal of grievances, and hassle-free processing of applications on the spot.

As of November 9, 2022, the total number of applications received under the “Aapki Yojana Aapki Sarkar Aapke Dwar” campaign was 41,10,112, out of which a total of 26,50,727 have already been disposed of and 14,59,385 applications are under process.

Raja Ansari, an applicant, said: “I applied for a job card at the camp organised at the panchayat level under the Aapki Sarkar Aapke Dwar campaign. I am delighted that I have been given a job card by the government.”

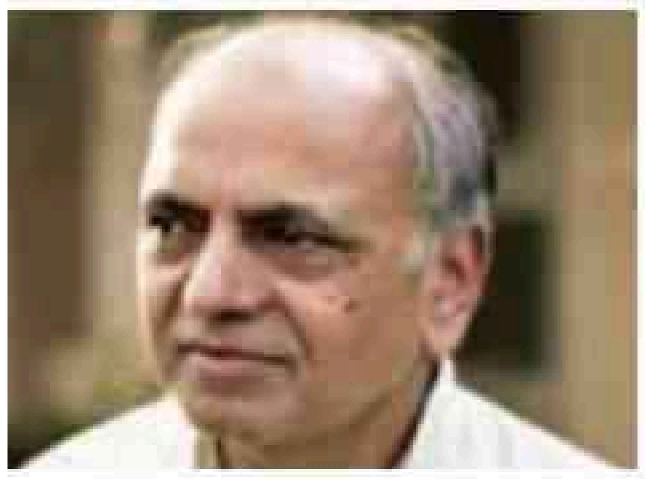
CULTURAL PRESERVATION

In an attempt to preserve the local culture and heritage of the people of Jharkhand, the State Cabinet gave its approval for the “Local Resident of Jharkhand Bill” with the aim to define the “local” population, basing 1932 as the cut-off year for the “proof of land records”.

According to the State government, this is a pertinent step towards “cultural preservation and honouring the customs and traditions of the moolwasis (original inhabitants) as well as safeguarding their identity and population”.

COLUMN

INDIA, THIS SIDE



GANESH DEVY

The Asian village

It crawls quietly, like a row of ants, but with an instinct for survival that far surpasses the existential desire of any other social organisation, whether it be city, nation, empire, or civilisation.

"GOD made the countryside, man made the city," was perhaps the most popular line in the intellectual discourse of the 18th century, particularly after the heart-rending scenes of migration depicted by literary works such as Oliver Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* inspired poetry and paintings born out of what the contemporary German philosophers termed the *esamplastic imagination.*

The entire "Romantic" generation of philosophers, painters, and poets of France, Germany, Spain, Italy, and England shunned the idea of having to create urban settlements. The copious paintbrush of William Turner of Oxford, for instance, did not have a single stroke to spare for an urban dwelling or street, though the children there were as innocent as the ones in the villages. If William Blake did speak of those children, as did Charles Lamb, it was to frighten the reader off the spectre of the sinful existence that a city has in store for rural migrants.

Rousseau's call for a return to nature, though too late in the economic history of the colonial West, was found alluring by the pre-Marxists, the Romantics, the Symbolists, and even the Pre-Raphaelites for a whole century. The idea of a city, despite its theatre and the tantalising possibility of not only philandering but actually "making it" by accepting the status of a "perpetual-picaro"—the unethical adventurer—took a fairly long time to rise out of its stigmatised status as a den of sins. The adolescent heroes of Charles Dickens, the fascinating heroines of Flaubert, and indeed the savage drama at the heart of *The Beggar's Opera*, all point to how harshly the city was considered by the social ethics of the first two centuries of the Industrial Revolution.

THE HARSH CITY

And indeed, those were the cities whose entrances were adorned by docks crowded with amorous sailors, crammed with ever-narrowing lanes made heavy by houses rising full three storeys high, obscuring the clear view of the cathedral or church, with backdoors opening into gutters, covered with manholes that made the night journeys of burglars and criminals look like an adventure. The city as understood in those times was no more than stench and squalor.

In order to make a city beautiful, long-winding paths to the country had to be dug up by cutting small hills. These paths, initially built for horse carts and hansoms alone, and the bridges built to span the portside rivers allowing thoroughfare between the citizen girls and the voyaging sailors, brought to European cities for the first time a look, albeit a false look, of being seamless. Otherwise, of course, the cities giving rise to what Karl Marx called "the capital" were condemned to be prisons created by the landless and rootless for themselves in an attempt to become the merchants of avarice.

Of course, there was a saving grace in the form of the Royal silver line added to the low-market city shape, such as the Versailles and Buckingham Palace, for instance. But, really speaking, they belonged to the medieval period. Their beauties were born in Baroque or Gothic nurseries, their sinews built of arches and pillars coined in the idiom of faith, just as the mosques in Spain and the forts in India were created on the foundation of theology rather than as a pure unambiguous state-

GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

A TYPICAL village somewhere in West Bengal.

ment of pride and power as a present day Twin Tower in New York City is.

It is not that the palaces were placed out of the cities; rather it was that the cities were spaced away from the royal enclosures, at least in the case of Paris, London, and Vienna. Rome was a bit too old to have received this unique urban planning feature, and it had already lost the city throb to the grand old Vatican. In Italy, of course, many other things happened in an anachronistic manner. Cities such as Siena had already brought the entire citizenry within the fold of its peculiar royal splendour, drawn more out of the natural element than out of a divine sanction (as the political systems in other European countries liked to formulate). One has to understand that the Italian cities had perhaps to build themselves as anti-fortresses to the papal charm. The Diamond Palace at Ferrara and the sundial in Bologna have a similar genesis.

Quite opposed to this, the world-famous Las Rambles avenue of Barcelona, throbbing with licentiousness and energy such as only the Basque language can express, was already established two centuries before the Industrial Revolution made its appearance. As a price, perhaps, the post-revolution Barcelona had to keep tearing itself from the hustle-bustle, and keep climbing above the mean sea level as far as it can.

In a sharp contrast to English, French and Dutch cities, American cities are built differently. Even if the linguistic idiom at the base of their creation is drawn from European languages, the "imagery" fuelling their growth is deeply rooted in what the expression "The American Dream" symbolises. They are racing as if to challenge the idea of horizons. No Limits! they seem to say.

The force and ferocity of the idea of city as the hub of civilisation as forged in the self-absorbed and aspiring American city provides the moving inspiration today for a Hong Kong and Dubai. They are built as if human civilisation did not begin at all until the automobile came into existence. There is also another variety of the urban "grandeur", interpreted literally as meaning big and bold. That is to be seen east of the now-non-existent wall of Berlin. One is not, of course, thinking of the grand Chancery building or of Berlin University. They were very much a product of the surpluses produced by the Austro-Hungarian Empire. But the central quarters of Moscow, and similarly of Beijing, have on show this grandeur. They occupy too much space. The quadrangles and courtyards of their own agrarian past—in China's case made tranquil by the Buddhist philosophy—came to be represented there in terms of "The Large Alone Is True".

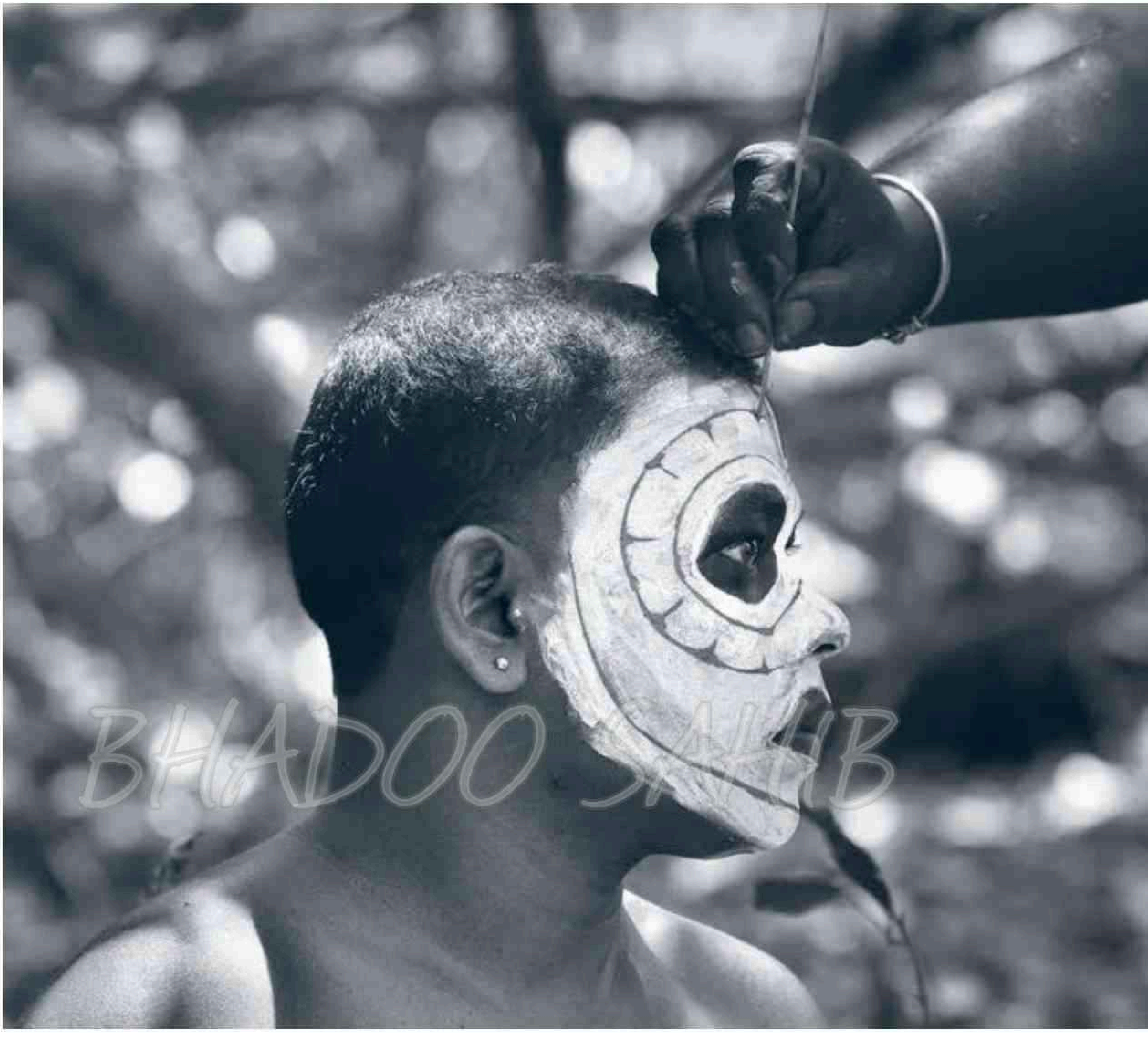
Even the statues in these vast spaces appear to be created quite clearly to intimidate and silence the viewer. One never has the courage to ask "who, where and why" while trying to keep them within one's view in a single pair of eyes—as one does while looking at the *pietra dure* of the Medici style, or even the amazing works of Michelangelo.

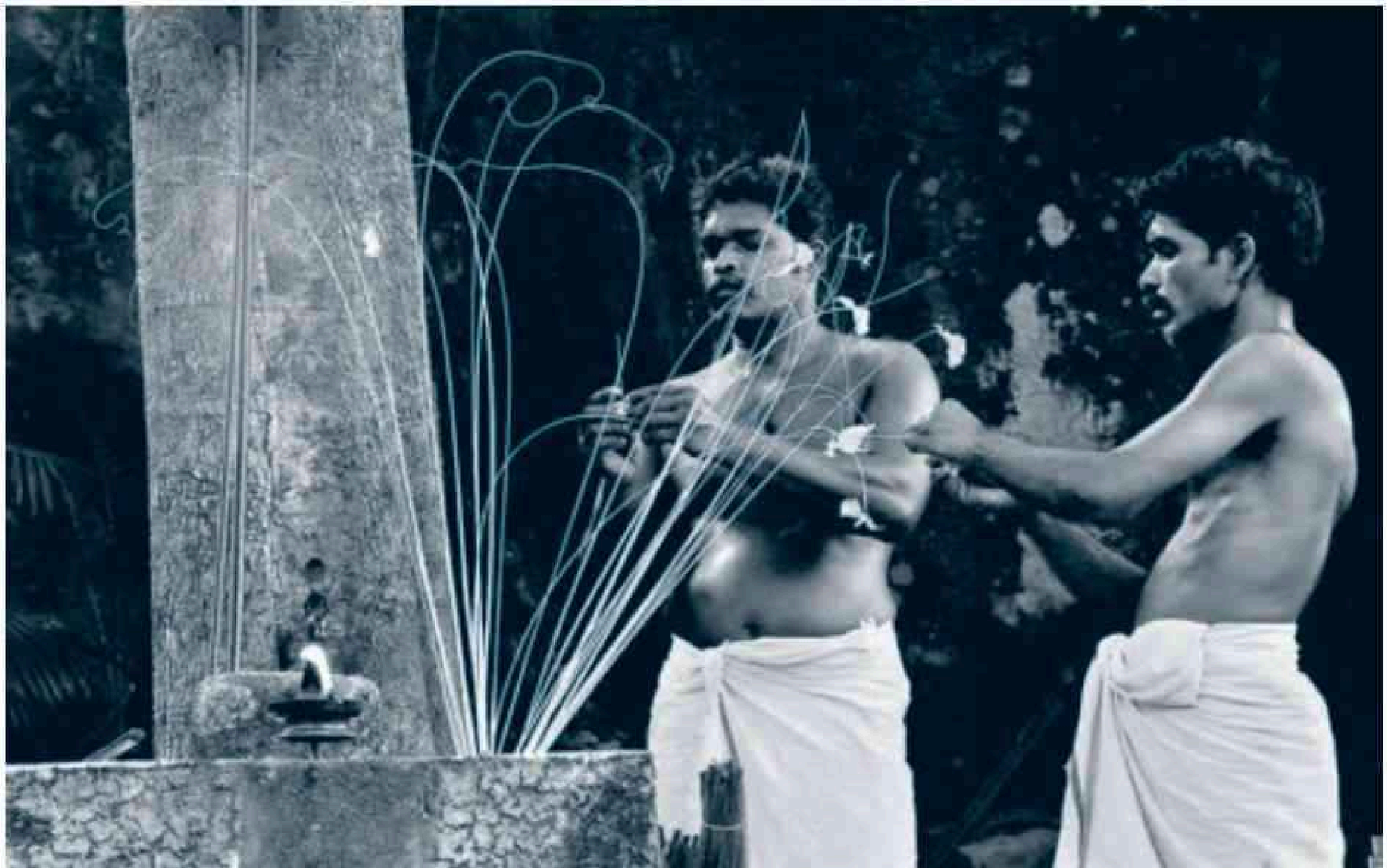
ESSENCE OF A VILLAGE

In contrast to all these urban creations stands the Asian village. Its past stretches to a lineage beyond one's memory. Ask a villager when her/his village came into being. The confused response will most likely be, "I do not know, but it has always been here." The non-origin and the ever-being-there are the essence of the village memory-scape. Ask an archaeologist when the Asian village developed as a social formation. The answer would be, between 9,000 to 7,000 years before our time. Over these millennia, cities came up and perished, but rarely recovered and found instead a reincarnation.

In contrast, villages keep reviving themselves. They are fragile but resilient, small in scale but tremendous in their ability to hold on to their place. It is not in the GDP or GST that villages contribute to the Indian republic that their worth can be measured. Their real worth lies in their providing a backdrop for the republic to be a nation. They do not rise majestically like some sitting elephants stand up to full height. That, cities do. The Asian villages crawl quietly, like rows of ants, but with an instinct for survival that far surpasses the existential desire of any other social organisation, whether it be city, nation, empire, or civilisation. The Asian village has lasted for so many millennia because it knows that it belongs to the earth but the earth does not belong to it. It keeps generating, creating, producing. The cities process, reassemble and name, consume and destroy what the villages have given them. Yet, the village persists, so that the species called *Homo sapiens* turns out to be a successful experiment in the long process of evolution. ☐

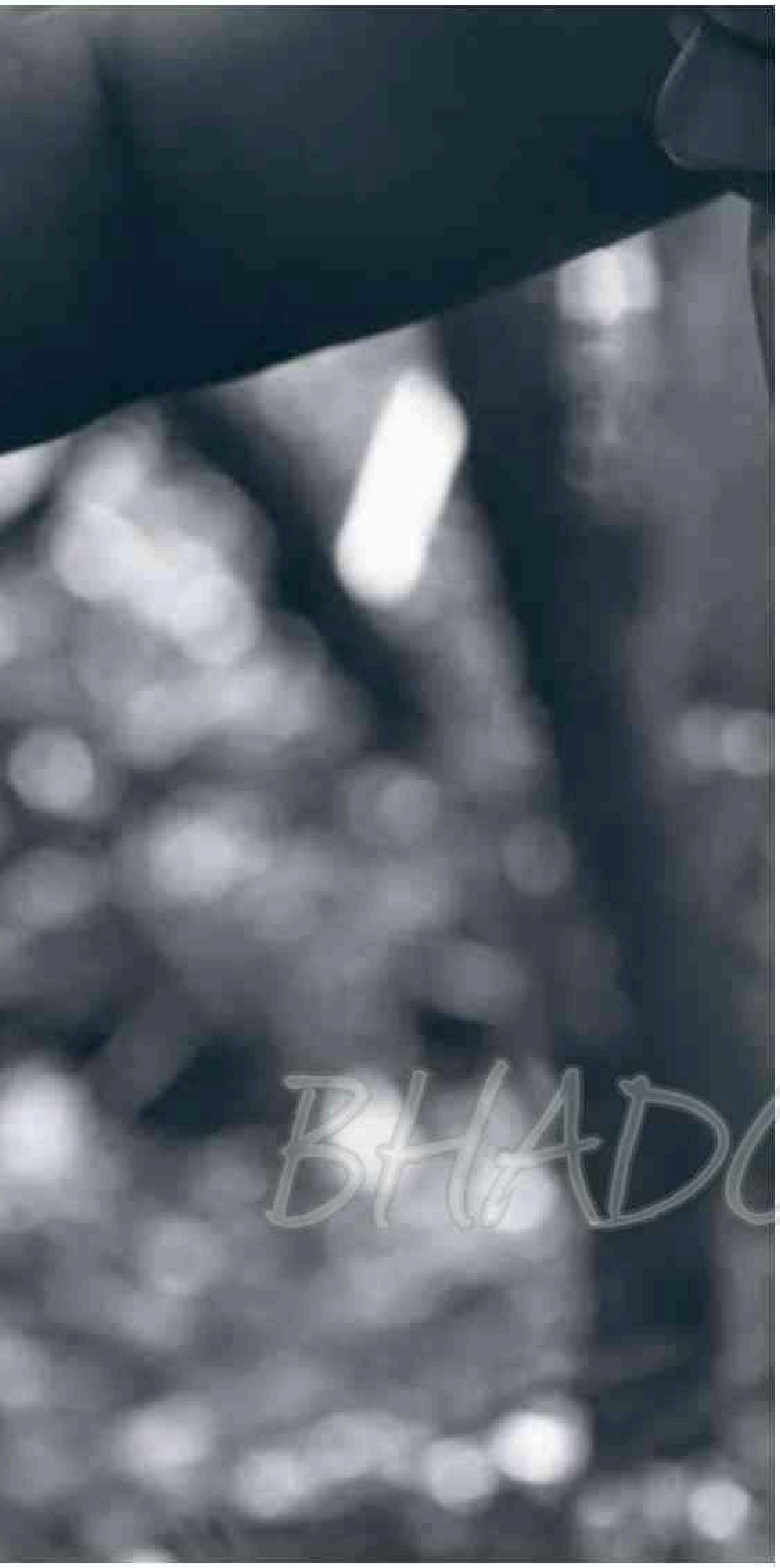
Ganesh Devy is a cultural activist and founder of Dakshinayana.





DURING a Mavilan Theyyam, a person belonging to the same community acts as a *parikarmi* (priest).

MOLANTHAMMA THEYYAM at a sacred grove in Kasaragod.



PETHAN THEYYAM'S mukhathezhuthu.

PHOTO ESSAY

Lesser gods

While theyyam, a ritual dance form performed in northern Kerala and parts of southern Karnataka, has been subversively empowering for certain communities, for performers among the Scheduled Tribe Mavilan and Nalkathaya communities the discrimination has only got worse.

Text & photographs by THULASI KAKKAT

KALICHAN THEYYAM at a sacred grove in northern Kerala.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF A MORTAL human into a theyyam deity—pantheistic deities typically presiding over a sacred grove (*kaavu*), a village, or a people—is slow and conspicuous, involving the intricate use of face paint, crimson garments, bell-metal anklets, headgear, and sword. The Mavilan tribe is believed to be one of the first to have performed theyyam in the early days of the ritualistic trance dance native to north Kerala.

Theyyam deities lend a compassionate ear to people's woes and, in response, hold them close, console them in their own language, and propose solutions besides offering them, and everyone else, a yellow tilak. All those who seek their advice are "children" to the theyyam regardless of their caste or religion.

CASTE BARRIERS

While theyyam has been subversively empowering for backward communities, for the Mavilans and the Nalkathayas, another community that performs theyyam, the discrimination has only got worse. The theyyams they embody face the same barriers of caste that the shaman performers face in real life. If there is a god for 'untouchability', it is theirs.

Both communities speak Tulu, are classified as Scheduled Tribes, and have for generations donned the mantle of their theyyam deities in south Karnataka and in Kerala's Kasaragod district. Their theyyam deities reside within stones and trees and draw raw energy from their tribal heritage and Dravidian essence. They have successfully fought off Hinduisation and continue to be known by their native names such as Pethalan, Kadayankathi, and Kattumodantha.

SHADOO SAHIB

There is a ritual connected to the Kaliyattam (a major theyyam performance) at Kakkat Mahavishnu Temple in Kasaragod's Madikai panchayat: the Kadayankathi theyyams walk from a nearby grove to the temple. But the temple is out of bounds for the theyyam, who stops at a spot outside the temple premises. The Kundora Chamundy theyyam of the Nalkathaya community, who sets out from a nearby sacred grove to the Alampadi Illam (a Brahmin tharavadu), also stops short of the illam.

Among the theyyams performed by children who make household visits in Karkidakam, the last month of the Malayalam calendar, which falls at the very end of the first monsoon rain, the Vedan theyyam of the Scheduled Caste Malayar community and the Adi theyyam of the Vannan community are allowed to enter the Madiyan Kulom temple in Kanhangad, while a child performing the Galinchan theyyam must steer clear of the temple.

Theyyams themselves have resisted such discrimination but with varying degrees of success. On the question of caste bias, there has been no support forthcoming from either the outside community or from fellow theyyam performers. In an intrinsically caste-ridden society, arguments to uphold such "age-old practices" continue to hold sway. □

A NALKATHAYA THEYYAM procession at Poyinachi near Kasaragod.

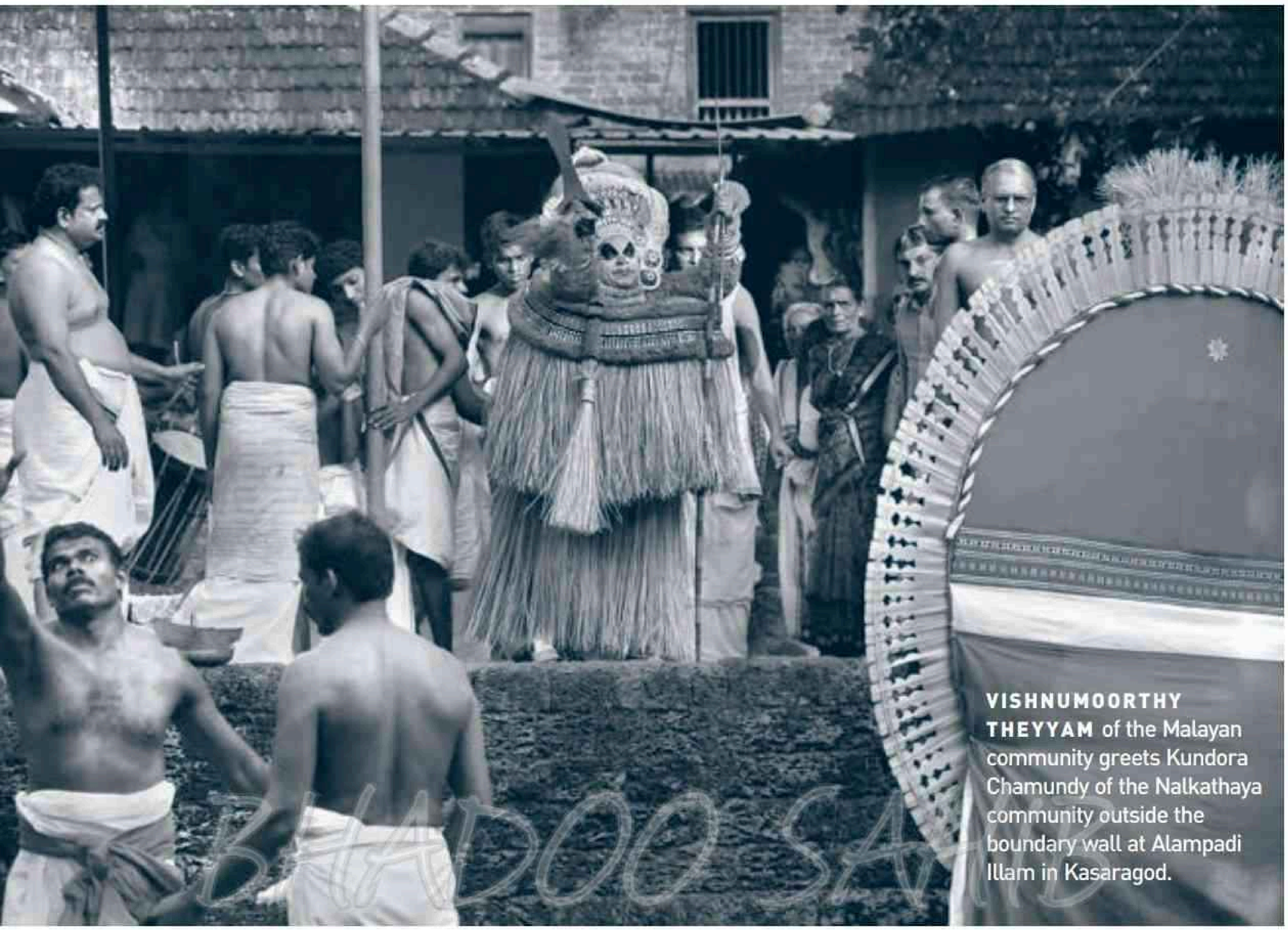
KUNDORA CHAMUNDY THEYYAM'S thottam ritual.

KADAYANKATHI THEYYAM at a sacred grove in Kasaragod.

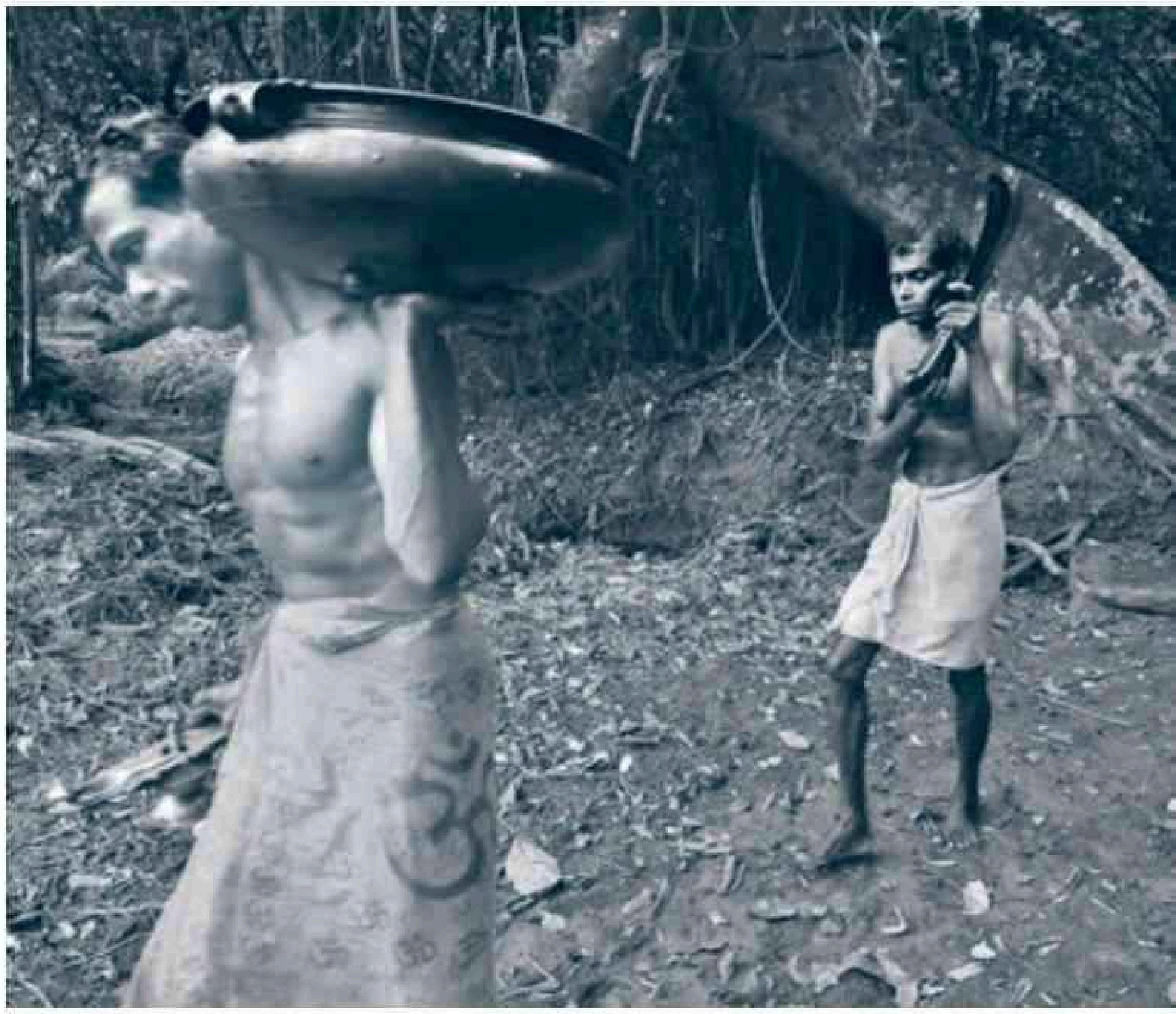
BHADOO SA

PETHALAN THEYYAM'S RITUAL dance. The theyyam deities of tribal communites reside within stones and trees and draw raw energy from their tribal heritage and Dravidian essence. They have successfully fought off Hinduisation and continue to be known by their native names such as Pethalan, Kadayankathi, and Kattumodantha.

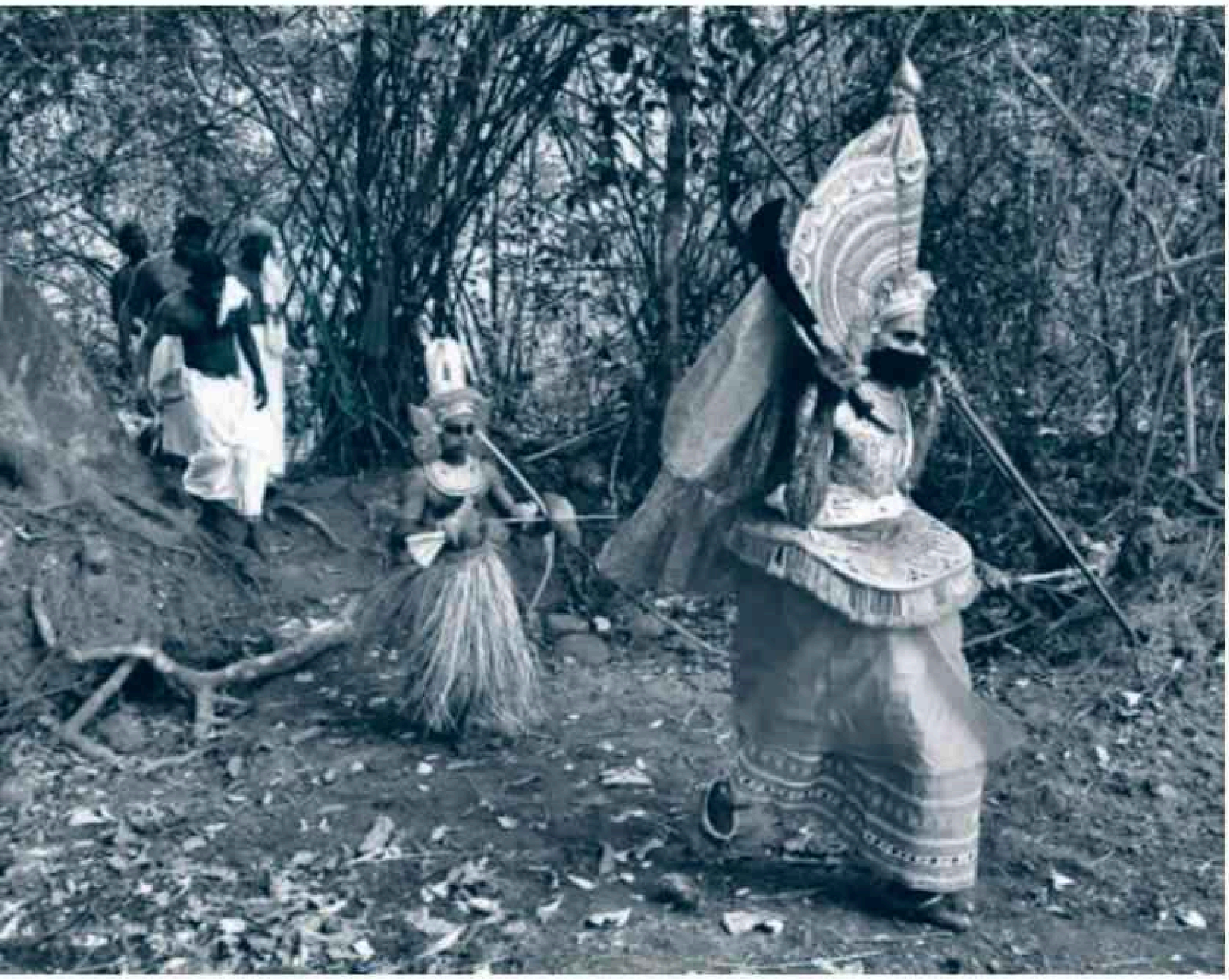
THE HINDU



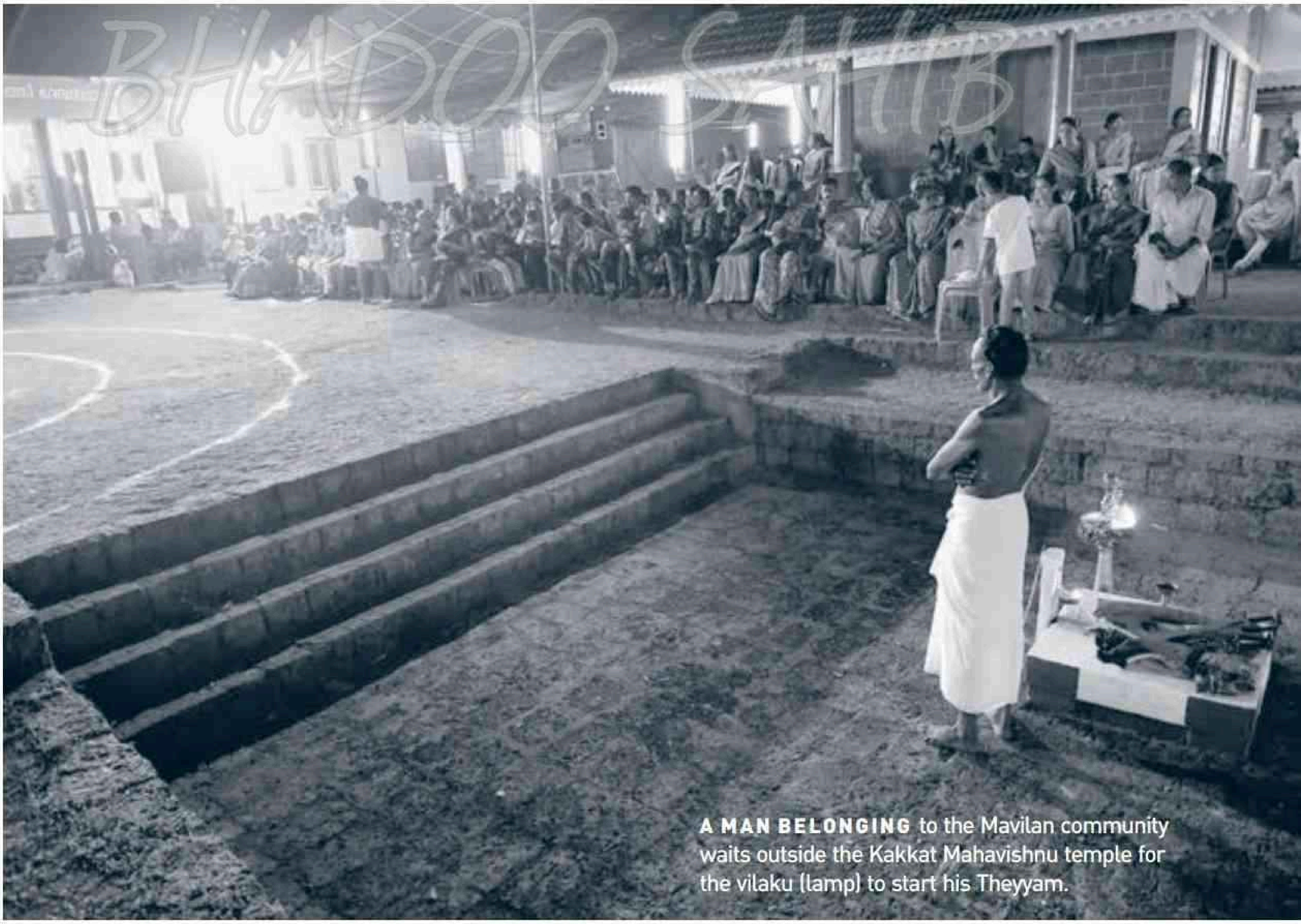
VISHNUMOORTHY THEYYAM of the Malayan community greets Kundora Chamundy of the Nalkathaya community outside the boundary wall at Alampadi Illam in Kasaragod.



MAVILAN COMMUNITY MEMBERS perform a ritual before the start of Kankalan Theyyam.



KANAKALAN THEYYAM AT a sacred grove.



A MAN BELONGING to the Mavilan community waits outside the Kakkat Mahavishnu temple for the vilaku (lamp) to start his Theyyam.

HERITAGE

Square of shadows

Kolkata's Dalhousie Square, once the hub of commerce and industry, is in a shambles, with its grand old buildings falling apart. And nothing has been done to preserve the legacy. BY **SOUMITRA DAS**

SOMETIME BETWEEN THE 17th and early 18th centuries, the British East India Company created a hub of business on the banks of the Hooghly in Bengal, founding a settlement with a factory, a fort named after the reigning English sovereign, King William III, and a church, St Anne's. The groundwork for this was done when the British obtained from Azim-ush-Shan, Aurangzeb's grandson and Viceroy of Bengal, "certain privileges of trade as well as permission to rent the three villages of Suttanutee, Govindapore and Calcutta (Kalikata)", wrote H.E.A. Cotton in 1909. In the course of time, the trio turned into a dizzying megalopolis at the centre of which was Dalhousie Square, known as BBD Bag today. Traces of the grand past still linger in corners of Dalhousie Square even as it undergoes the upheaval that comes from joining Kolkata's expanding Metro railway network.

The General Post Office (GPO), whose construction was completed in 1868, is located on the Square's west. It has a marble plaque bearing

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

WRITERS' BUILDINGS.

an inscription saying the south-east bastion of old Fort William was situated there. Annoyed by the peskiness of the British, Siraj-ud-Daula stormed the vulnerable Fort William in June 1756 and partially destroyed the factory, fort, and St Anne's Church. But the last independent Bengal nawab retreated, disappointed by the paucity of the spoils. A new township came up on the ruins after the old fort was demolished and the garrison shifted to its current location further south, in the vast green space called the Maidan.

The Mahakaran Metro station comes up south of the eponymous iconic red building, which was the headquarters of the "writers" or junior clerks of the East India Company and served until recently as West Bengal's administrative seat. Mahakaran means secretariat, that is, Writers' Buildings, Writers' in short. It is being renovated at present in a project that was announced in 2013.

DISTINCTIVE ARCHITECTURE

The Tank Square named after Lord Dalhousie, Governor General of India, in 1865, was renamed in 1969 after Benoy-Badal-Dinesh ("BBD"), the three revolutionaries who shot dead inspector of prisons N.S. Simpson and fought a gun battle in the Writers' corridors in 1930. It is bound by Writers' Buildings and the adjacent St Andrew's Kirk on its north. Old Court House Street is laid out in front of it. On its east is Stephen House terminating with Currency Building, and its southern end is marked by the distinctive architecture of the Central Telegraph Office (originally named Dead Letter Office) with its campanile or Italian bell tower, whose construction was completed in 1876.

On the Square's west is the GPO designed by Walter Granville, its dome dominating the skyline. Adjacent to it is the Reserve Bank of India ziggurat constructed in 1964, opposite Writers'. The stretch between the two buildings runs parallel to Old Court House Street and is called Netaji Subhas Road: it was originally named after Robert Clive, the hero of the Battle of Plassey (1757), which led to Siraj-ud-Daula's defeat and India's thralldom.

However, the heritage precinct of Dalhousie Square covers a much larger space—embracing Strand Road on the west and stretching up to Lower Chitpur (Rabindra Sarani now) on the east; until the Brabourne Road flyover and the Portuguese church on the north; the Treasury Building and Calcutta High Court on the south.

This was the nucleus of "white Calcutta", as opposed to the messy "black" township of the native people. As its name suggests, the former was once inhabited exclusively by the British and Europeans. The harmoniously laid out streets and stately buildings with a tank (Laldighi), which was excavated bang in the middle for providing clean drinking water, created a semblance of order and discipline that the government's indifference towards its upkeep, unruly traffic and the ubiquitous presence of hawkers and eateries have not been able to defeat. Laldighi has run wild as it has been closed off for the past four years.

FADING EMINENCE

Even after the Indian capital shifted to Delhi from Kolkata in 1911, the city retained its political and financial clout. It started declining from the 1970s, when capital fled as violent trade unionism wrecked industry. Arun Lall, a retired mercantile executive who has lived for seven decades in the magnificent art nouveau gem, Esplanade Mansion, constructed in 1910 by the Jewish tycoon David Ezra, says:

"In the 1950s through to the 1970s, Dalhousie Square was the epitome of good, solid, profitable commerce and industry. There was a multitude of British firms and managing agency houses such as Andrew Yule, Balmer Lawrie, Bird & Company, Brooke Bond India, Duncan Brothers, General Electric Company of India, Gillanders Arbuthnot & Co, James Finlay, Jardine Henderson, Jessop's, J. Thomas, Macneill & Barry, Martin Burn & Co, McLeod &

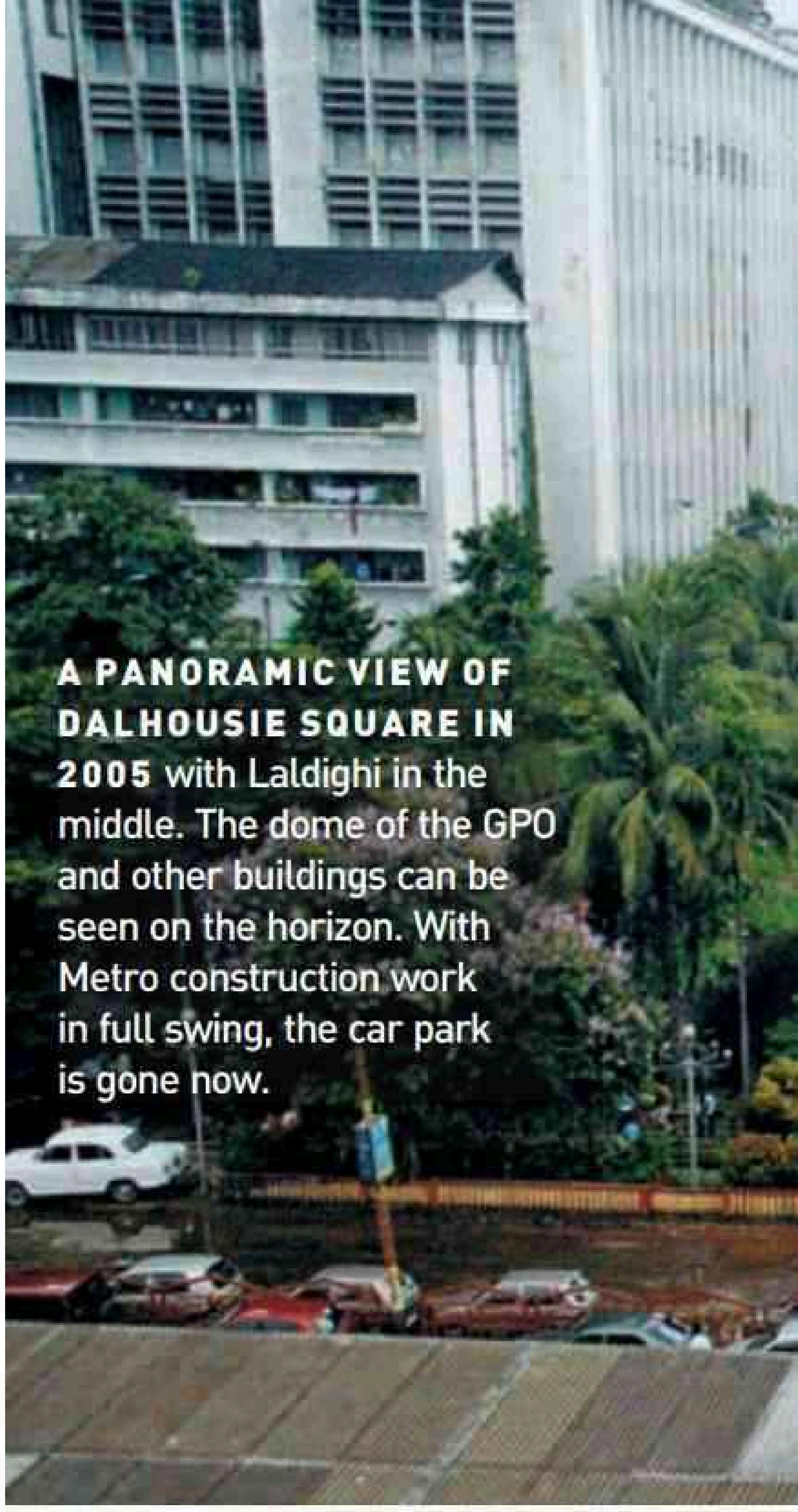
> The harmoniously laid out streets and stately buildings created a semblance of order that years of government indifference have not been able to defeat.

Co, National Tobacco, Shaw Wallace, Turner Morrison, and Williamson Magor, to name but a few. Added to these hallowed names was a host of well-known tea companies, British banks, and insurance companies.

"They were all housed in magnificent colonial buildings, with each one having its own unique aura and each one offering a long and progressive mercantile career for many a bright young aspirant." Managing agency companies are gone for good, and the firms that remain are only there in name.

In August 2013, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee announced a Rs.200 crore project to turn Writers' Buildings into a modern workplace without compromising on its heritage value. This conglomeration of 13 blocks that housed 34 departments and a workforce of almost 6,000 was in urgent need of restoration. While the administration shifted to Nabanna, a blue-and-white 15-storey building in Howrah, the Public Works Department's work has progressed under wraps at a snail's pace in the past nine years. G.M. Kapur, member of governing council and State convener of Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), wonders if the administration will start functioning from the building again or whether Writers' will become a museum. "If its purpose is known it could be designed accordingly," he says.

Writers' was not built in a day. In 1776, when Warren Hastings was Governor, the site of the demolished St Anne's Church and the adjoining plot were granted to Thomas Lyon to construct Kolkata's first three-storeyed buildings to accommodate the junior servants of the East India Company. The range of buildings that looked like a "shabby hospital, or poor-house" was leased out to the


A PANORAMIC VIEW OF DALHOUSIE SQUARE IN 2005 with Laldighi in the middle. The dome of the GPO and other buildings can be seen on the horizon. With Metro construction work in full swing, the car park is gone now.

SUSHANTA PATRONOBISH

CHRISTOPHER TAYLOR

THE GRAND OLD STAIRCASE of Standard Chartered building.

Company for the rent-free accommodation of its writers in 1780. Two 128-ft-long verandas with Ionic style columns, each 32ft high, were added on the first and second floors in 1821. In 1830, private individuals, who were in charge then, turned the buildings into living quarters, shops and warehouses.

GRAECO-ROMAN LOOK

Ashley Eden, Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, was told to shift the principal government offices, situated in Sudder Street and Chowringhee, to Writers'. Initially three blocks were constructed. Between 1879 and 1906, two new blocks were added, approached by iron staircases which are still in use. Writers' acquired its Graeco-Roman look, complete with the portico in the central bay and the red surface of exposed brick.

The parapet was put in place and the statues (sculpted by William Frederick Woodington in 1883) that line the terrace were installed. Minerva stands above the central portico. Before Independence, Writers' had a large courtyard with seven blocks. By 1970, all 13 blocks were constructed.

The Central government buildings in this zone are periodically spruced up although it is difficult to keep up with the rising damp and the burgeoning parasitic plants. Their architectural beauty is screened by the thick foliage of trees that have shot up haphazardly along pavements. The privately owned buildings have, with a few exceptions, taken a hard beating, with no effort on the part of their owners to disguise their shabbiness, swathed as they are with miles of cable.

Land sharks, economic exigencies brought on by laughably low rents, and high property taxes have often compelled landlords to abandon these white elephants. They have been replaced by ungainly glass boxes that now smother this heritage area.

Dalhousie Square's harmony was first upset when Dalhousie Institute was demolished to make way for Telephone Bhavan in 1954. LIC, which owns about 80-odd prime properties in Kolkata, is allowing the disintegration of the former Peliti's restaurant, dating back to 1870 and frequented by Rabindranath Tagore, and the Oriental Assurance Buildings of 1914, gorgeous if overgrown with greenery. The austere stone-clad Mackinnon Mackenzie Building on Strand Road that was gutted in a mysterious fire has since turned into Diamond Heritage, a squat structure offering "ready-to-move-in office spaces".

Still named Standard Chartered building, although the bank walked out years ago, the domed property with alternating red and white bands belonging to the Burdwan maharajas is caught in a legal battle. The staircase leading to the grand wooden entrance now serves as someone's bed, protected by a mosquito net. An ornate pavilion installed in Fairlie Place to commemorate the Prince of Wales' visit is now a battered tea stall. The vast and ornamented Strand warehouse was consumed by flames in 2010.

B.V. Doshi and the late Charles Correa had time and again appealed for the protection of the priceless legacy that is Dalhousie Square. But short-sighted governments obviously are not listening. ☐

Soumitra Das is the author of White & Black: Journey to the Centre of Imperial Calcutta.

Do you hear the people sing?

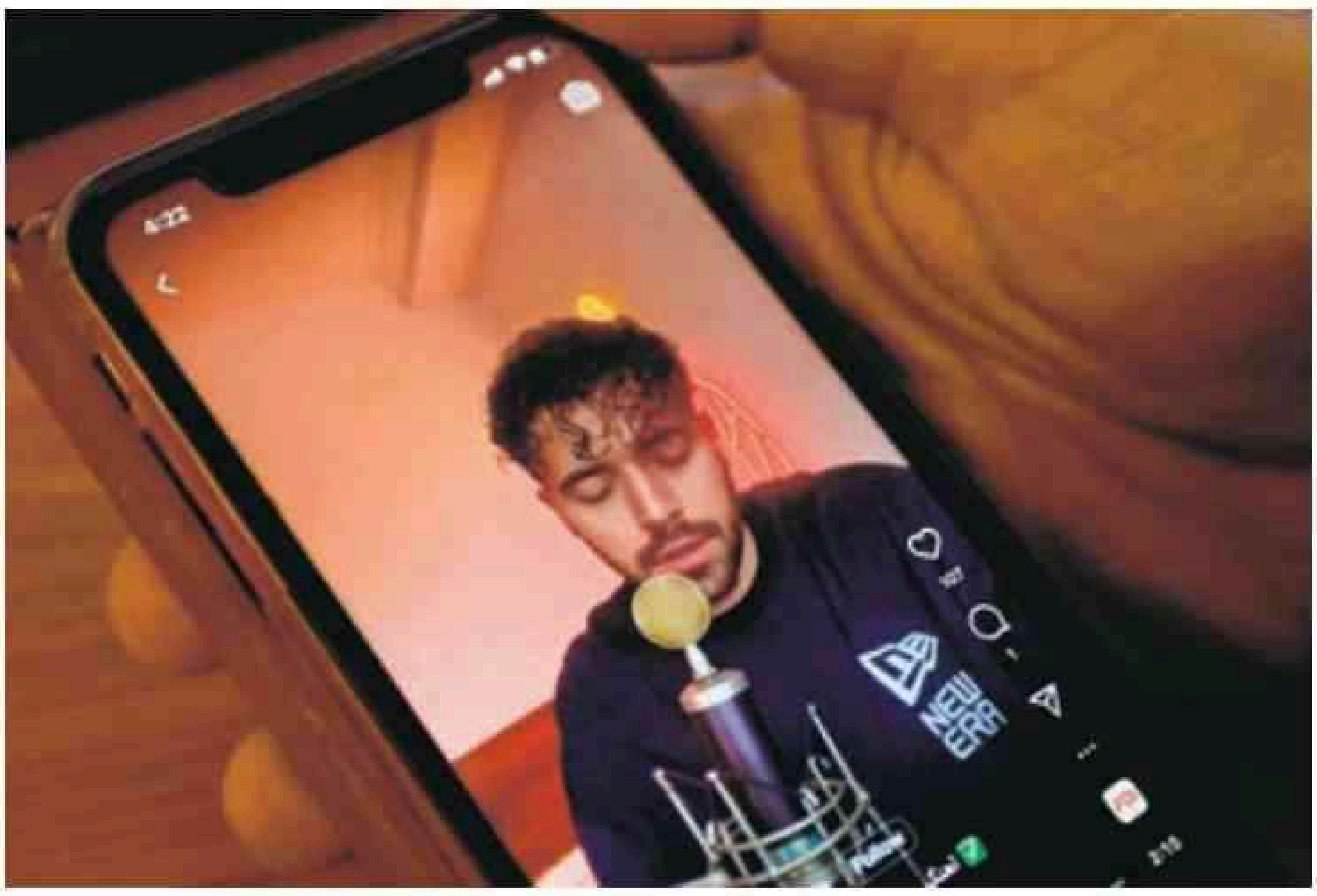
The song "Baraye Azadi", now banned in Iran, is a lament for an ordinary, peaceful life that has spread worldwide like wildfire. It has sparked imaginations, just like other revolutionary songs before it that also went viral. BY **VIJAYTA MAHENDRU**

YOUTUBE SCREENGRAB

GOLSHIFTEH FARAHANI, exiled Iranian actor, performing with Coldplay in Buenos Aires in protest against the supression of women's rights in Iran, on October 29.

DURING THEIR CONCERT IN Argentina on October 29, popular English band Coldplay invited the exiled Iranian actor Golshifteh Farahani on stage. Together, they performed the new anthem of protest in the ongoing Mahsa Amini movement for women's rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, that has been dubbed "Baraye Azadi" (For Freedom).

The song made waves as soon as it was released online by the 25-year-old singer-composer Shervin Hajipour, and was watched over 40 million times in just two days. Subsequently, Hajipour was arrested by the government, and released only



KHALED DESOUKI / AFP

SHERVIN HAJIPOUR, a 25-year-old Iranian pop singer who wrote the song "Baraye Azadi", after the death of Mahsa Amini on September 16 after she was arrested in Tehran for not wearing the hijab properly. His emotional performance went viral on social media platforms.

after the song was removed from his social media page.

Bringing an Iranian female lead singer on stage to perform the song was in itself an act of protest, considering that after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, female solo singing was outlawed in Iran. The period prior to that is recalled as the "Golden Age of Iranian Music", but the revolution abruptly ended the career of many popular singers like Homeyra and Googoosh, who were compelled to leave the country. As for Golshifteh Farahani, she was exiled in 2012 for appearing in "unacceptable" photoshoots for the Western media.

"Baraye Azadi" is now technically banned in Iran, but what the song represents is a lament of desire for an ordinary, peaceful, and mindful life that has caught global attention and now it can be heard everywhere, from the cobblestoned Persian crossroads lined by protesters to international platforms and stages. Roger Waters of Pink Floyd, taking off from the band's classic "Another Brick in the Wall", tweeted: "Hey! Ayatollah leave them kids alone!" In many ways, therefore, the ban has been ineffectual.

People-led and popular political events, such as the current one in Iran, are times when the sensibilities of artists are honed sharp, their antennae raised, insides churning, as, being present in the eye of the storm makes them produce works that have the power to inspire millions of people and become global currency. In this respect, "Baraye Azadi" joins other famous songs in the revolutionary hall of fame.

TO DIE FOR LIBERTY

One of the most famous of such songs is the Italian "Bella Ciao". What started as a women's protest song against the hardships of working in rice fields under a padrone, or overseer, was later adopted by the anti-fascist *partigianos* (the partisans) who fought against the Nazi forces in the 1940s. The song was briefly banned in Italy by the right wing in 2015 but it came back stronger.

"Bella Ciao" has now evolved into a song with hundreds of versions that call for the rights of all people to be liberated from tyranny and is known internationally as a "Hymn for Freedom". The power of its lyrics and music has been used in many historic revolutionary events, including the farmers' protests in India last year, adapted as the Punjabi "Wapas Jao" (Go Back). It was also widely sung during the COVID-19 pandemic, when people isolated within their homes sang the song from their balconies. As it is taken up and adapted globally, the song's power to unite the world is unmistakeable.

JOEL SAGET/AFP

ACTOR FARAHANI was exiled in 2012 for appearing in "unacceptable" photoshoots for Western media.

"Bella Ciao" has a fascinating Turkish connection. It was adapted as "Bella Chav" by the revolutionary music band Grup Yorum, which had been under attack from the government of Turkey since it started to perform in 1985. In 2016, the band's studio was destroyed, its members arrested, and the group banned. The band was charged with being associated with an ultra-left political outfit that had been designated a terrorist organisation by the government, but the charges could not be proved. Eventually, the members of the band were released. A few of them sought asylum in other countries, but many remained in Turkey, flitting in and out of prison.

In May 2019, some of the band members decided to go on a hunger strike to protest the ban. Over time, two of them, Helin Bolek and Ibrahim Gokçek, decided to fast unto death for their right to make music and sing.

Neither did the government relent nor did the two. In April 2020, Helin died after 288 days of fasting and in May, Ibrahim died, after 323 days of fasting. The last line of "Bella Ciao" is *Muerta per la Libertad*—To die for Liberty.

Some days after the death of Gokçek, a curious incident happened in Izmir, a Turkish city. Instead of the regular *azaan*, or call for prayer, Grup Yorum's version

REUTERS

VICTOR JARA, the celebrated Chilean gutarist and singer. He was among those arrested after Augusto Pinochet seized power in Chile in a coup in 1973, and it is said he died singing "Venceremos" (we shall prevail), the song of the pro-democracy movement in the country.

of "Bella Ciao" was played from several minarets of mosques across Izmir. A woman was later arrested for orchestrating this protest.

GLOBAL SOLIDARITIES

Another song that stirs revolutionary fervour in people is "El Pueblo Unido Jamas Sera Vencido", or "The People United Shall Always Be Victorious". It started as a slogan in Chile, chanted during the rallies of Salvador Allende, a widely beloved socialist leader.

The song, written and composed later, became emblematic of the "Nueva Cancion Chilena" (New Chilean Song) movement. Composer Sergio Ortega set to tune the words written by Quilapayun, a band that was soon to become intertwined with not just the Nueva Cancion Chilena movement but also with Salvador Allende's government.

On September 11, 1973, the Latin American equivalent of 9/11, Allende died during a CIA-backed coup d'etat. It was at this point that the song became the people's war cry against the subsequent military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet.

The song's socially committed lyrics have had a profound impact on pro-democracy movements in countries across the world in the 1970s and the 1980s. Over time, it became a universal protest song, uniting the whole world, adapted and translated by people from almost all countries.

Interestingly, the Leftist revolutionaries who were instrumental in the Iranian Revolution that deposed the Shah regime in 1979 composed a Persian version of the song called "Barpakhiz" (Arise). The Left, however, was later decimated by the Islamic Republic.

Another Nueva Cancion song was "Venceremos"—we shall prevail. It was composed for Allende's election campaign and became so popular that the leader famously said that "there can be no revolution without a song".

When Pinochet took the reins of power in Chile, his men rounded up all known socialists and tortured them, including the celebrated singer and guitarist of the time, Victor Jara. It is known that they crushed his fingers and mocked him about playing the guitar, before killing him. Jara died singing "Venceremos".

CROWNS FLUNG, AND THRONES FELLED

India and Pakistan might be two of the most quarrelsome neighbours, but music—folk, pop, and now Coke Studio—unites the fractured subcontinent. There is also a shared protest hymn, "Hum Dekhenge" (We shall see), in which the poet claims that it is written in the book of destiny that we shall witness the fall of the oppressors and their tyrannical instruments and live in a world where truth and equality prevail.

This Urdu *nazm* was written by the Marxist poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz in 1979, impending the hanging of the first democratically elected Prime Minister of the country, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, by the militarist Zia-ul Haq regime. Faiz also had in mind the people of Iran who, at the time, were revolting against a dictatorial monarchy.

Zia's rule was marked by an increasing role of religion in law and governance of Pakistan. The lyrics of the poem are incendiary to rulers and perceived as blasphemous from the Islamic point of view. The poem was, therefore, banned, as were sundry other things, like wearing sarees, in Zia's Pakistan.

> What makes "Hum Dekhenge" special is that it not only unites the masses of India and Pakistan in their love for the song but also unites the conservatives on both sides in their contempt of it.

In 1986, noted ghazal singer Iqbal Bano performed "Hum Dekhenge" in a packed auditorium,

THE HINDU ARCHIVES

FAIZ AHMAD FAIZ'S "Hum Dekhenge" being performed in Bengaluru at a protest rally, a file photograph. Faiz wrote the *nazm* before Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's hanging in 1979 in Pakistan. Its lyrics are incendiary to rulers and seen as blasphemous to Islam. It was banned, as were sundry other things, like wearing sarees, in Zia-ul-Haq's Pakistan. In 1986, ghazal legend Iqbal Bano performed "Hum Dekhenge" to a packed auditorium, wearing a saree.

wearing a saree. This act of double defiance, whereby she imparted a tune to Faiz's *nazm*, immortalised "Hum Dekhenge" in the subcontinent's psyche forever.

From then on, it has been invoked time and again by people who want to raise their voice against governmental excesses. It was copiously sung during the reign of General Pervez Musharraf in Pakistan and during the anti-CAA movement in India. What makes "Hum Dekhenge" special is that it not only unites the masses of the two countries in their love for the song but also unites the leaders and conservatives on both sides in their contempt of it.

The profundity of Faiz's words is such that the custodians of religions on both sides of the border perceive the nazm to be against them, their faith, and their country. To belittle its social impact and usage, "Hum Dekhenge" was caricatured in a recent Hindi movie as a song sung by "anti-national" college students. But it is unlikely that the song can be shushed.

While many revolutionary songs and poems come from people who were a part of a movement, the impact of the media and entertainment industry also cannot be ignored. In recent times, one of the most widely sung protest songs—"Do you hear the people sing"—was picked up from the 1980 musical *Les Miserables*, for which it was composed.

Based on the novel of the same name written by Victor Hugo in 1862, *Les Miserables* tells the story of an ordinary peasant named Jean Valjean and his miserable life. It culminates with him joining the revolution on the streets of Paris to overthrow the government. "Do you hear the people sing" is sung in the climactic sequence, first by the protagonist, then by the rest of the crowd in a surging chorus.

WILL NOT BE SLAVES AGAIN

Les Miserables is one of the longest running shows in the world. For over four decades, the song has resonated with ordinary people who have a fire within that pushes them to demand justice and a better life. The lyrics and the beat aptly capture the spirit of protest, reiterating that the people "will not be slaves again", while offering hope for the future—"there is a life about to start when tomorrow comes".

It is one of those songs that tugged at the heartstrings of millions of people across the globe and like "Bella Ciao" and "El Pueblo" has been translated into several languages.

In several recent popular movements, such as the Arab Spring, the Maidan protests in Ukraine, the Gezi Park protests in Turkey, the South Korean anti-government movement, the protests against the Duterte government in the Philippines, protests in Belarus and in China, and most recently during the Sri Lankan crisis, "Do you hear the people sing" echoed in the streets.

The fundamental human feelings of pain, oppression, revolutionary fervour, desire for a better life, and love connects people all over. And on the notes of music one flies over national boundaries and barbed-wire fences. ☐

Vijayta Mahendru is an independent researcher who works on people and places, art and culture. She is also a multilingual singer. She canbe reached on Instagram: @vijayta_mahendru.

COLUMN

COUNTER CULTURE

PRATHYUSH PARASURAMAN

The magic of cinema

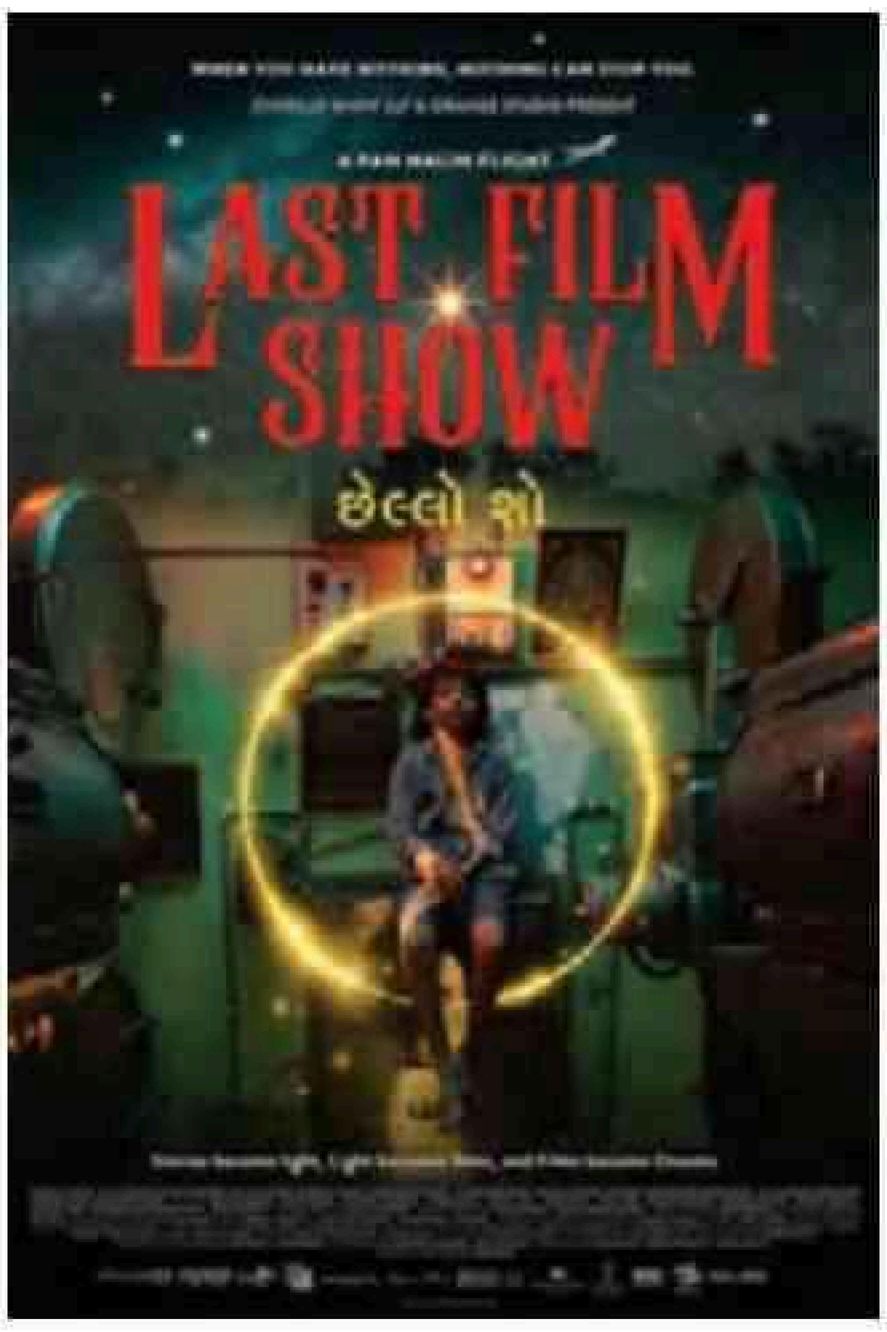
India's Oscar entry, *Chhello Show*, is a grim reminder of how digital technology severed cinema from the physicality of people's labour that was once intrinsic to it.

CHHELLO SHOW, India's humble—if totally left of field—submission to the behemoth industrial acrobatics of the Oscars, is a highly provocative film. It follows with intense attention the journey of a 9-year-old child, Samay (Bhavin Rabari), who discovers his love for cinema as laboured magic, and if you look past the "nostalgia", "ode", "Cinema Paradiso-lite" criticism, you can hear a more seething and socialist rumble. By socialist, I simply mean what the late Mike Davis described as "the belief that the earth belongs to labour".

'GIANT DREAM MACHINE'

This socialist conviction locates the "magic" of cinema—I say magic because of the alchemical possibilities it lends to our humdrum existence, what the director Jean Cocteau called "this giant dream machine"—in its physicality. The movies we see, if we think about it, are around 24 frames captured and stitched into a second of textured motion, printed on chemicals or desiccated into pixels, transformed, transferred, to then become coloured light flung from a horizontal machine onto a vertical screen, all involving people.

And once we severed this physicality of cinema from cinema by becoming more digital, powdering reels into pixels, heavy, heaving, smoking machines that eat up tightly wound film negatives into slick laptops, we lost something intrinsic to cinema. That cinema and so much of that often purported magic of the medium, its possibilities, came from its labour. Debashree Mukherjee, author of *Bombay Hustle: Making Movies in a Colonial City*, which chronicled the cementing of Bombay Cinema through the 1930s and 1940s, began her book with an image of, perhaps, a light boy on the sets of *Jawani Ki Hawa* (1935) at the Bombay Talkies Studio, his back facing the camera. We do not know who he is, and we never will, and yet his contribution circulates.



Mukherjee insists on the term "cine-ecology", in order to lasso into the idea of cinema the labour that produced it. That we must look at "cinema as production experience, [one that] invite[s] workers, then and now, to imagine new horizons for the self, marking the labour of filmmaking with a particular futurity".

Mukherjee does to film production what *Chhello Show* does to film reception, taking our interest in the medium and swerving, funnelling our attention to the people who gird the magic with their sweat and stamina: that man behind the film camera, that man behind the film projector.

MOHAMMED YOUSUF

A FILM SET being erected at Annapurna Studios in Hyderabad in April 2012. Debashree Mukherjee insists on the term "cine-ecology", in order to lasso into the idea of cinema the labour that produced it.

Chhello Show begins with the idea of cinema as a community-building exercise. The only film Samay's father is willing to let them go watch is a mythological spectacle. This is a genre that has not received much attention from film lovers, considered entirely peripheral to the idealised cinema of our imagination, a sort of scraping of the bottom of the barrel. But so much of Tamil, Telugu, and Kannada cinema—industries dominating the discourse today—emerged from this genre, and despite *Sholay* and *Deewaar* being released in 1975, the most profitable film of that year was *Jai Santoshi Maa*, a low-budget mythological tale directed towards rural women, for which people removed their slippers before entering the theatre as though entering a temple and hurled coins, flowers, and rice at the screen as though partaking in a ritual—so, what of this film history?

> The most gruelling moment in *Chhello Show* is seeing all the film equipment being melted down.

THE MASS SPECTATOR

The screen is now the thread connecting the holy and the home-bound, not the individual spectator but the mass spectator and the spectacle. As social scientist M.S.S. Pandian notes in the article "Tamil Cultural Elites and Cinema", when the talkies made a windfall in the 1930s, it was celebrated by the lower classes as a form of spectatorship, while seen with an anxious eye by the custodians of high culture. I remember sitting at the recent Amitabh Bachchan retrospective in PVR Cinemas—a multiplex chain that completely drove all the single screens out of business, the same single screens that were imperative and foundational to Bachchan's success—when a friend turned to me and asked sincerely whether what we were partaking in, celebrating a single-screen communal idol in the regimented discipline of a multiplex, was appropriation.

HEART AND HEARTBREAK

Samay, through his friendship with a Muslim film projector who lets him watch films for free, learns both heart and heartbreak. Heart from the communal experience. Heartbreak for the labour. The conflict of the film is not so much about how his strict, anti-cinema parents react to his new-found love for cinema as about how the digital revolution eviscerated film, rendering projectionists unemployed, and how love for the medium, though challenged, is a stain that refuses to be washed clean.

The most gruelling, emotionally gutting moment in *Chhello Show* is seeing all the film equipment—the reels, the machines, the steel and plastic—being melted in a factory, flattened, and moulded into bangles, plates, spoons, and other things that populate our lives, as though reincarnated. Like Yashaswini Raghunandan's *That Cloud Never Left*, which follows, with its magic-realist vision, villagers who repurpose film reels into toys sold thousands of miles away, this film, too, refuses to end with a sense of hopelessness.

At the end of the film, Samay is on a train, journeying towards the city where he will "study light". Like children holding their hands under a running tap trying to grasp what is fluid, Samay tries to grasp the light from a projector, an early lesson in how cinema is light, in how the word for cinematography in Tamil is *olippathivu*, or an impression of light. He is surrounded by these reincarnated remnants of the cinema he loved: the machines, the negatives melted into bangles that clink. That even as one world ends, another is opening up. That cinema, like air, is all around us, even as its shape shifts. □

Prathyush Parasuraman is a writer and critic who writes across publications, both print and online. He also authors a newsletter on culture at prathyush.substack.com

Writing the raga

Interview with Amit Chaudhuri, writer and Hindustani classical singer.

BY **SUBASH JEYAN**

GEOFF PUGH

AUTHOR AND HINDUSTANI classical singer Amit Chaudhuri won the James Tait Black Prize for Biography in August 2022 for his memoir, *Finding the Raga: An Improvisation on Indian Music* (2021). His latest novel, *Sojourn*, came out soon after and was greeted with enthusiastic reviews in India and abroad. Chaudhuri, who is a professor of creative writing at Ashoka University in Sonepat, is many things rolled into one—novelist, essayist, poet, singer, music composer. He has authored eight novels, a collection of short fiction, and three volumes of poetry to date. His fourth novel, *A New World*, received the Sahitya Akademi award in 2002. He is also actively involved in the preservation of Kolkata's architectural heritage, built in a style he calls "Bengali-European"—"a utopian idea of what a mish-mash of Renaissance, Hindu, and Mughal features might be"—which is in danger of being swallowed up by land sharks as "development" sweeps all over India.

While *Finding the Raga* is expectedly lyrical, *Sojourn*, too, flows seamlessly as its protagonist, a visiting professor in Berlin, reflects on identity, history, and migration while forging friendships and making sense of desire. Chaudhuri discusses his books, music, ideas of home, and much more in this email interview. Edited excerpts:

In *Finding the Raga*, you say that you had a sense of belonging to two worlds simultaneously during your childhood in Bombay: "We felt Indian but somehow also felt Woodstock was our inheritance". Do you think that the ongoing attempt by the right wing to impose a monoculture on us is a reaction to this kind of modernity?

Yes, that's partly—and substantially—what it is. But I discuss in the book that although we did shut out "Indian traditions", they formed our milieu in unfixed and open ways, and, at a certain point of time, one could open a door and move towards, say, as was the case with me, Hindustani classical music.

The literatures of Indian modernity (Malayalam, Bengali, Kannada, to mention three) have been, in the last two centuries, full of—indeed, they were created by—such doors being opened, sometimes accidentally: for instance, [Michael] Madhusudan Dutt's turn to Bangla; O.V.Vijayan's to writing fiction in Malayalam; [U.R.] Ananthamurthy's desire to write a novel about his village while watching [Ingmar] Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* without subtitles when he was a graduate student at Birmingham.

Side by side with the rise of the right wing, I think our Anglophone post-globalisation liberal elite, with its particular stake in the nation-state, began to become disengaged from this history of an unpredictably eclectic Indian modernity, full of departures, multiple provenances, and *volte faces*, and concentrated on a more polite version of "pluralism" of which it then became a custodian.

My own turn to Hindustani classical music was unusual at the time because the liberal middle class was becoming narrower in its ambitions, and, soon, English would become synonymous with modernity. It's this narrowing that gave the Right an opportunity to tap into an unarticulated sense of the hollowness of the prevailing order, and the liberal middle class was, by then, too disconnected from any complex sense of its own history to be able to defend itself except by appealing to universal values, human rights, and the Constitution.

Do you see any link between the emphasis on the "mastery of grammar" in North Indian classical music and its current irrelevance (you say in the book: "classical music is now so peripheral")?

The importance given to mastery of grammar—a kind of *panditayan*; a pedantic authoritativeness—has been characteristic of this tradition for a very long time. Also characteristic, though, was an openness to *sur*, or tone or melody—to surrender to it; to adore it. The capacity to recognise this rare thing, *sur*, is a transformative and essential thing in any vibrant musical culture.

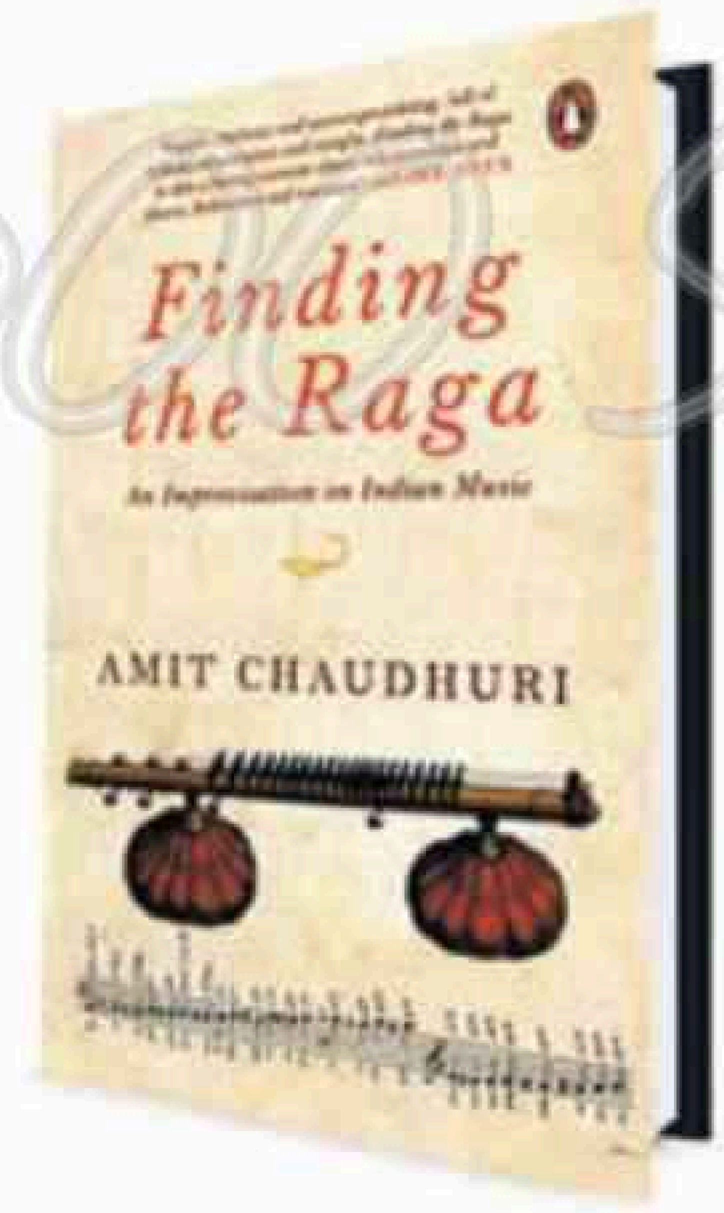
Sadly, *sur*—or whatever you wish to call it: "melody", "beauty"—has been made so secondary that I fear our capacity to acknowledge and hear it has become eroded. This means we're not only left with mastery of grammar, but also with coteries and pure self-interest: a growing detachment from, even an unspoken disavowal of, melody's directly transformative quality. Coteries and their patterns of exclusion and inclusion are the main problem today, not *panditayan*.

You associate this "mastery of grammar" with a "Brahminical mode that Indian thinking is often in danger of slipping into". Can you elaborate?

I mean a form of pedantry—a bureaucratic mindset—that assumes you're an outsider or foreigner unless you have convincingly proved you're an insider, and which will reach for rules, regulation, and obscure citations to disprove your legitimacy. It's a mindset not only peculiar to Brahmins, although they provide a convenient metaphor for the practice I'm alluding to; it might characterise any Indian, or group of Indians.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is a forgotten figure, the *rasik*, who, whether or not they're Brahmin, confess, through their openness to beauty and their willingness to cherish it, to their vulnerability and their non-brahminical side.

You quote Tagore saying that there is an "absence of dramatic narrative tradition in Indian music". Clearly that is not the case, unless you, through Tagore, are referring to North Indian classical tradition. Down south, there are plenty of narrative traditions like the *kathakalatchebam*, *harikatha*, and *villu paatu* in folk music.



SOJOURN
AMIT CHAUDHURI

I quote both Tagore and Ray here because their insights about narrative in music are of great interest, and it isn't an accident that both emerge from multiple traditions and histories at times when those histories are changing, and that both are artists who work in different genres, including music, and have to figure out for themselves the cultural implications of working with "Western" or "Indian" music and the intellectual traditions they belong to.

Whether or not music has a narrative or dramatic element doesn't depend on whether or not it occurs in a dramatic context; it has to do with whether music is presented, or interpreted, in quasi-narrative terms. The most powerful narrative underlying forms of thinking and art-making in post-Enlightenment Europe is the narrative of humanism—that man, not God or gods, is at the centre of the universe—and, with it, the narrative of development: man can better himself and, perhaps, ultimately aim to master the universe. This would lead to interpreting both representational art forms like the novel, and non-representational ones like music, as somehow having to do with, or embodying, man's journey.

An art form that shifts the focus to contemplation—like *khayal* does, even in the segments to do with *layakari* (rhythmic play) or *taankari* (virtuoso melodic patterns)—will create a way of listening in which we engage with detail for its own sake, and not for the part it is playing in a progression towards a climax. Even in a *drut khayal* or in a composition in *natya sangeet*, we're looking at phrases in the *taan* improvisations—say, *ni re ga ma dha ni sa; pa ma dha pa ma ga ma ga ma dha ni sa*—as individual thoughts that sometimes amplify previous thoughts rather than as elements in a progression moving towards a climax.

You set up an opposition between Western classical music and North Indian classical music. The former, in your view, is like the Western

realist narrative whose primary function is to tell a story as if it were a slice of the world itself. You liken North Indian classical music to poetry—meditative, non-narrative, and non-representational. Surely these are interesting but just convenient categories?

I'm speaking of not Western music but how it's been thought of and received since Romanticism: it's been given a narrative dimension, sometimes unobtrusively, sometimes explicitly, via the story of humanism. *Khayal* does not emerge from a world view akin to Western humanism; its intellectual provenances lie elsewhere. But the categories given to us in relation to music by Western humanism—including the idea that music is a universal language—are certainly pervasive (whether or not they're 'convenient' is another matter) and they can't be taken at face value if we're to understand what music means to us.

"As Hindustani classical music reminds us, 'India' is text. Only a small bit of reality can be conveyed by narrating stories 'about' it, or representing it in pictures." I think a very large percentage of Indians' experience of India is very different.

What I'm getting at is that we must think of text, composition, and environment quite differently when we're thinking of the raga in comparison to, say, a sonata by Schubert. The idea of the closed-off composition or concert performance, outside of which lie the audience and the world, will not do. It's because the model of the "closed" composition reached a dead end in Western music that you had a composer like John Cage create a work like "4'33", a composition in which nothing was ostensibly played, so that world and the audience, in effect, could become part of the text of the composition.

It's impossible for me to speculate on what the majority of Indians think. My aim anyway is not to address what I or they already know or have been told, but what I'm not fully conscious of.

Amir Khusro, you say, "seems to be the first self-conscious Indian". "Perhaps it requires not nationalism but a degree of estrangement and unfamiliarity to understand and celebrate what being Indian is..." I was surprised to find that "political" comment.

> "I want to blur the distinction between writing and living. The raga is one approach to this thought."

The most eloquent proponents of the wonder and burden of what it means to be Indian have often been what would today be called foreigners: people like Khusro and the poet Henry Louis Vivian Derozio.

Talking about the raga, you write: "The raga is not *about* the world; it's of it." And later: "The raga is not a self-enclosed composition, it's an unfolding rather than a representation.... We listen to it as it happens." Is it to fair to say that you have attempted precisely this in *Sojourn*?

I think I became more aware during the writing of *Friend of My Youth* that I don't aim to write about my life; I want to blur the distinction between writing and living. The raga is one approach to this thought: a blurring of the divisions between composition, performance, season, time of day, and the world, between living and singing. So the answer is yes.

Is *Sojourn* an extended meditation on the ideas of home and displacement?

One could call it a meditation, though on what I'm not sure. This experience we call "meditation" we do so because of its stillness, but it's also characterised by transformation and movement. The earliest example of a kind of text that embodies this paradox is the Gita: nothing happens in it, but meanings are altered—at least, something changes in us as we read it despite there being no apparent movement or plot.

I'm not comparing *Sojourn* to the Gita—I'm invoking the beginnings of a tradition in which transformation and movement are not necessarily synonymous with movement and story. The changed meanings I'm exploring in *Sojourn* definitely include "home", and they include our sense of what has formed us historically, a formation that can't be explained away by ethnicity, religion, colonialism, nationality, and ideas of "influence". In the book, Berlin and Europe become a way of addressing how these categories aren't adequate to define who we are.

At many places in *Sojourn*, homecoming or belonging is associated with a temporal and spatial displacement. That is, "home" is not necessarily associated with a particular place. Your comments.

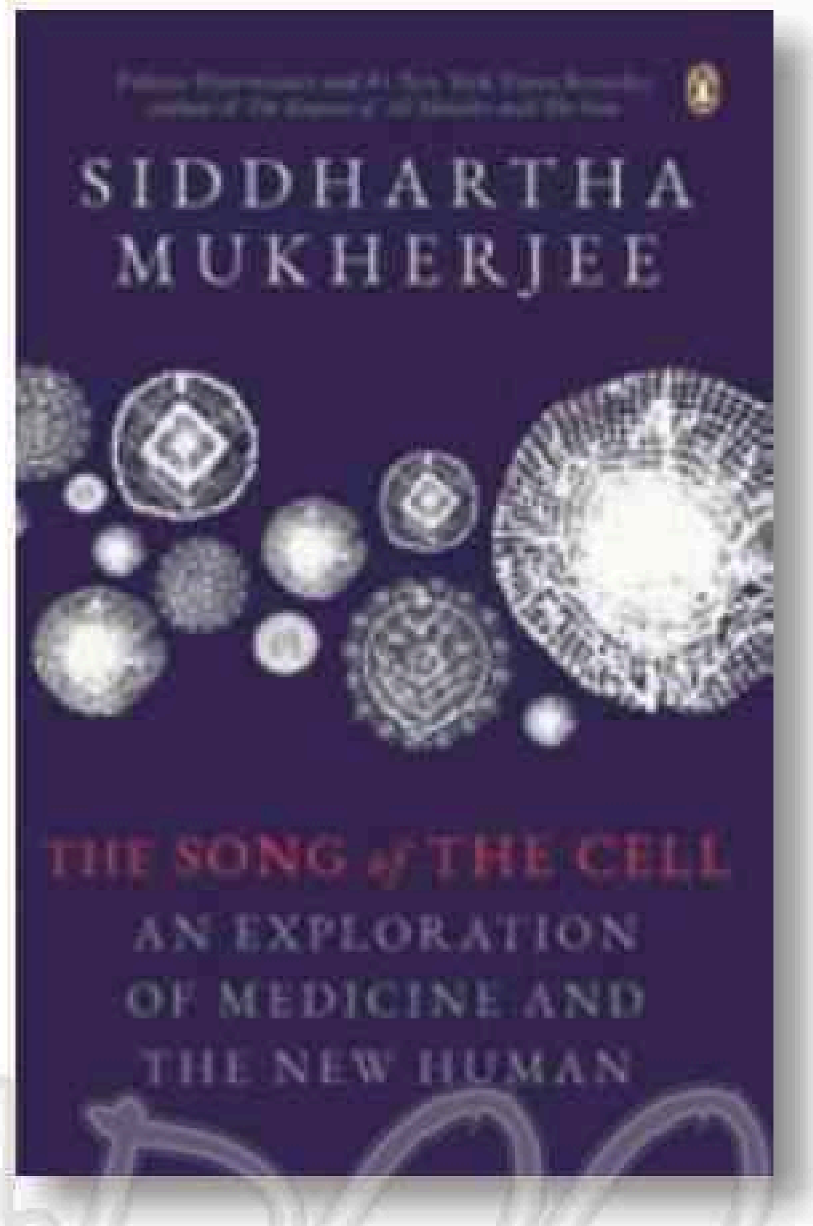
Yes, absolutely—your observation chimes in with what I've just said. Berlin, in *Sojourn*, is not home and it is very much home—a place with which the narrator believes he has "a history". He doesn't know what that "history" is. His conscious mind and his education would have no answers. So I examine not his thoughts on this matter, but try to enter his sense of absorption in what he sees.

How important is "soundscape" to you? I found this sentence arresting: "Sometimes Dahlem was so quiet that I could hear the silence in the way I could see sunlight in the room...."

Soundscape is very important to me both as a writer and as a musician/composer. As a listener of music, say, I prefer some kinds of music to others. But as one attending to what you call "soundscape", all sounds (including music) are equally interesting to me. □

A life in many cells

A fascinating history of modern medicine, this book takes the reader on a guided tour of the most basic unit of life—the cell. BY **SANJAY A. PAI**



The Song of the Cell

An Exploration of Medicine and the New Human

By Siddhartha Mukherjee

Allen Lane/Penguin Random House India

Pages: 473

Price: Rs.799

IN *The Song of the Cell,* physician-scientist Siddhartha Mukherjee takes us through a guided tour (de force) of the most basic unit of life itself—the cell. As one would expect from a book written by Mukherjee, whose earlier works include *The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer* and *The Gene: An Intimate History*, this exploration is an enthusiastic and intellectually satisfying one. As an explainer of events and processes in medicine, Mukherjee is now the equivalent of Carl Sagan for space sciences.

This book is a non-linear history and narrative of the cell—its microscopic anatomy, biochemical processes, pathology—in 24 chapters. We travel from the past (from 1665, when the first cells were seen and the word "cell" itself was created by the polymath-scientist Robert Hooke, who was struck by the regularly arranged "boxes" in a thin slice of cork when he studied it under a microscope and perceived a resemblance to the living quarters of monks) into the present day and take a peek into the near-future.

Hooke's discovery was followed by that of Antonie van Leeuwenhoek, a Dutch draper and amateur scientist who explored rainwater, seawater, and his semen with the aid of a microscope and discovered fascinating tiny organisms which he labelled "animalcules".

Although the botanist Matthias Schleiden and the zoologist Theodor Schwann had proposed that the cell was the basic unit of life in the 1830s, there was a lack of clarity about where those cells originated from. The French radical (in every sense of the word) scientist François-Vincent Raspail posited that cells arose from other cells.

This was underscored by the genius German pathologist Rudolf Virchow, who added that disease resulted when these cells went awry. There are a staggering number of specialised cells in the human body, and each of these is staggering in its simultaneous simplicity and complexity of structure and function. Mukherjee takes you, like in the 1966 science-fiction film *Fantastic Voyage,* on a swim through the cell, where you meet and learn more about the various components ("organelles") such as mitochondria, endoplasmic reticulum, and the nucleus.

Chapters that elaborate on the various functions of the cell, such as cell division, cell development, defence mechanisms, and so on, follow. The author enlightens us about the biologic processes, intersperses it with history, and often leads on to the latest medical application of our knowledge of the process. Consequently, the explanation of cell division leads to the story of the first test-tube baby. It is because of this approach that he can educate us about the thalidomide tragedy in the chapter on cell development.

THALIDOMIDE TRAGEDY

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, thousands of pregnant women who took a thalidomide pill to prevent morning sickness delivered babies with malformed ("seal limbs") or absent limbs or with cardiac and other organ defects. Cell development had gone awry because the drug had interfered with the proteins that play a role in normal development of the heart, limbs, and organs.

The rest of the book has essays on specialised cells such as platelets and lymphocytes in that marvellous fluid tissue, blood, as well as cardiac muscle cells and cells in the brain such as neurons (the "contemplating cell"), as also the ignored-until-now glial cells. In all this, do recall that cells in the body do not live in isolation; rather, they constantly communicate with each other and listen to each other's signals—or their "songs".

All great scientists, I suppose, have to be mavericks, in order to question dogma. Quixotism repeatedly surfaces as scientists challenge cherished beliefs and propose and prove new theories about our very own bodies.

QUIRKY THINKERS

For instance, we have believed for long that cells differentiate, that is, they progress from an uncommitted "stem" cell to a final, mature, committed cell at which stage they stop and change no further. Yet, in 2006, Japanese scientists achieved the seemingly impossible when they experimentally reconverted mature fibroblasts into stem cells by introducing appropriate genes into their nuclei.

Other examples include the preposterous idea of researchers in 1975 to fuse a cancerous plasma cell with a B-lymphocyte (both being types of blood cells). This resulted in a unique cell that secreted specific proteins called "monoclonal antibodies"—the most significant advance in laboratory diagnostics and in treatment in the past half-century.

This finding was so revolutionary that the National Research Development Corporation in the United Kingdom could not think of an obvious practical use for this finding and chose not to patent it, resulting in the loss of billions of dollars to them. Because, almost immediately, medicine changed, and today medicine without monoclonal antibodies is pretty much like medicine without anaesthesia or antibiotics.

It is an indicator of how rapid the progress in cell biology has been, when one realises that many of the audacious discoveries (of which numerous have resulted in Nobel prizes) that startled us just a few years ago now seem almost quotidian. In the past decade alone, we have had two such ideas—gene editing (clustered regularly interspaced short palindromic repeats, or CRISPR) and CAR-T (chimeric antigen receptor T cells).

> Many of the audacious scientific discoveries that startled us just a few years ago—such as gene editing and CAR-T—now seem almost quotidian.

In CRISPR, highly specific and directed editing of genes can be performed so as to transmogrify cells. Mukherjee explains that this mechanism is so effective that it is the equivalent of locating and deleting one word in one book of a library that contains 80,000 books.

It goes without saying that gene editing in humans opens a minefield of ethical quandaries. In 2017, He Jiankui, a Chinese researcher, decided to go ahead anyway and created gene-edited babies. The result? Babies with altered genes but of uncertain, dubious, and potentially harmful outcomes. Jiankui was jailed for three years for flouting the most basic principle of medical ethics and for experimenting when no experiment was needed.

Consider the CAR-T phenomenon, the latest bullet in our armamentarium against cancer. We know that cancer cells escape being attacked by the soldiers of the immune system by adopting different approaches. One manner of achieving this is by ensuring that the soldier cells do not perceive the cancer as foreign.

It turns out that a family of soldiers, the T lymphocytes, have a safety switch (a "checkpoint") on so as not to attack the body's own cells. Now, CAR-T cells have this blocking mechanism itself blocked by drugs ("checkpoint inhibitors") and can now attack the tumour by recognising it as alien.

Is it possible to write a book on medicine in 2022 and leave out COVID-19? Obviously not, more so because the disease is the result of the floundering of the immune system. After all, it is the host cell, which, when taken over by the virus, fails to secrete Type I interferon, which is one of the defence mechanisms.

Mukherjee's vivid descriptions are not restricted to the cell. Nobel Prize-winner Sidney Brenner has eyebrows like "twin caterpillars", he writes; another Nobel Prize-winner, Paul Nurse, reminds him of an "elderly wizened Bilbo Baggins"; and a colleague, Chuck Chan, looks like "a punk rocker".

Hindu mythology crops up on more than one occasion. As in his earlier books, the author seamlessly interweaves present-day life into the events that created our current concepts of cell biology. The reader is privy to Mukherjee's enthralling research, his interactions with family, colleagues, patients, and mentors.

THE NEW HUMAN

What of the future? Here is where the subtitle of the book—the new human—comes in. Mukherjee proposes that the very concept of medicine is artificial. Assisted reproduction, blood transfusion, and bone marrow transplants (topics examined in the book) are commonplace now.

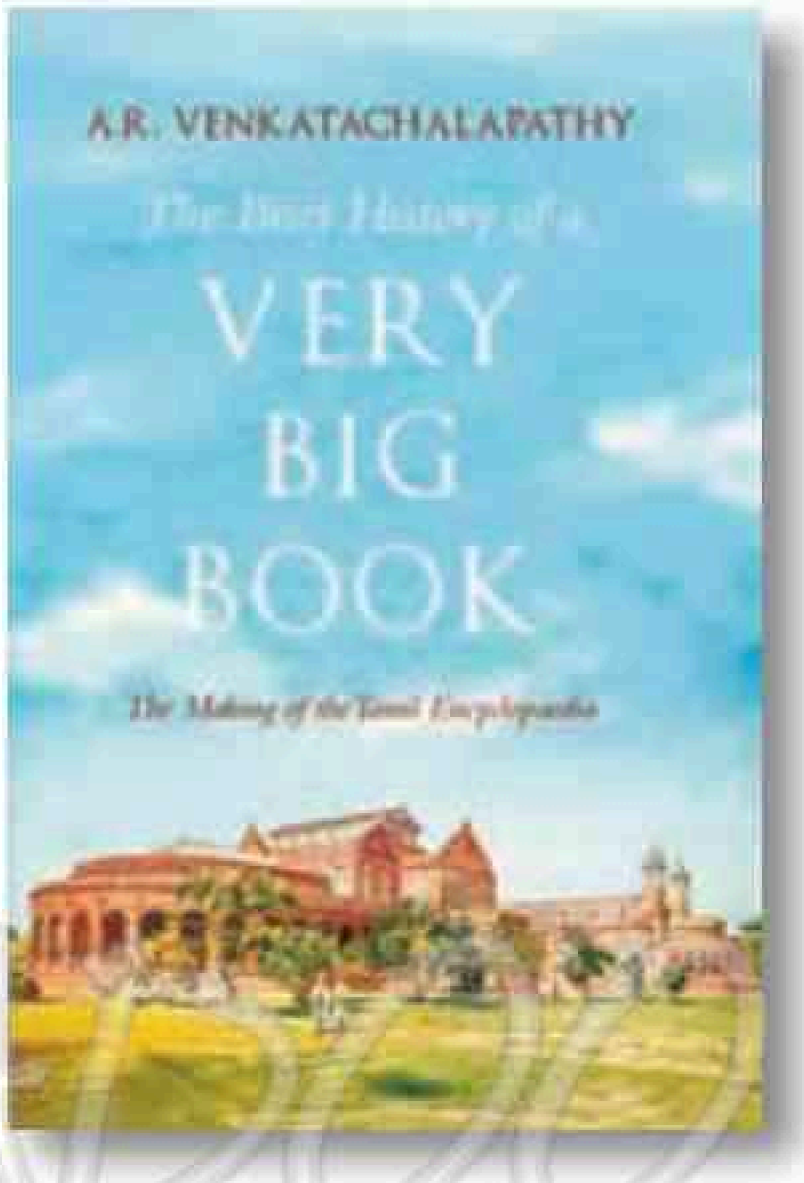
Ideas such as editing genes to reduce cholesterol levels and thus the chances of a heart attack; permanently replacing adult-type haemoglobin with foetal-type haemoglobin in the red blood cells of adult patients with sickle cell anaemia (because the disease only affects adult haemoglobin, not foetal haemoglobin); placing electrodes in the brain so as to cure depression—these seem revolutionary today, but may perhaps not be so in the future.

"We are all made of star-stuff," Carl Sagan famously said, indicating that, at a molecular level, all the particles in our bodies were created from the death of stars. Mukherjee reminds us that we should be equally fascinated by the fact that biologically we are all made up of an extraordinary building block—the cell. ☐

Sanjay A. Pai is a Bangalore-based surgical pathologist and amateur medical historian.

Treasure trove

The story of the 10-volume Tamil encyclopaedia *Kalaikkalanjiyam* and its survival through financial stringency, administrative complexities, and political uncertainties. BY **GOPALKRISHNA GANDHI**



The Brief History of a Very Big Book

The Making of the Tamil Encyclopaedia

By A.R. Venkatachalapathy

Permanent Black, 2022

Pages: 168

Price: Rs.595

A SCHOOLBOY visiting a friend's "book-type" uncle sees a neat row of the volumes of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and is drawn to their "fine print, thin paper, and sturdy binding". Even more by "the level of detail... the tone of authority... brevity of expression".

This, needless to say, is well before the age of Wikipedia. And the boy is, even by the book-bound norms of that tactile age, also a "book type". He loves books and he loves Tamil, his mother tongue. He turns the pages of the volume with "T" entries, runs his little finger down the page to the entry on "Tamil", finds and devours it, wanting confirmation of his own sense of his beloved language's antiquity. He is disappointed to see the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* make it seem less hoary than he imagined it to be, would like it to be.

Years later, he comes, with the awestruck inevitability of a Tenzing Norgay beholding Mount Everest, to *Kalaikkalanjiyam* (literally, a treasure trove of the arts), the 10-volume Tamil encyclopaedia. Initiated at what may be termed as Indian independence's "crack of dawn" in 1947, the most backbreaking, eye-straining, and dedicated labour was put into the exercise by a hugely punctilious and skilled team. It was published in 10 volumes from 1954 to 1963, with a slender budget but a vast vision.

The story of the 10 volumes' survival through financial stringency, administrative complexities, *inter se* complications among the team members, political uncertainties, and the imponderables involved in getting experts from across the country and abroad to send their contributions, needed to be put down. This, urgently, before paper trails and memory pathways faded away. And before the age of Wikipedia made the set valued by a small number "only for its antiquarian value".

This is when the "schoolboy's little finger", now in the shape of the hand of a distinguished scholar, author, and teacher, turned its 7,500 pages to savour their contents and trace the corpus' fascinating history. Professor A.R. Venkatachalapathy has pieced together that narrative from material sifted through discussions, archival probing, searches in the dusty, musty and (as I imagine) cobweb-veiled basements of premises that hold more than they can make scholarly use of.

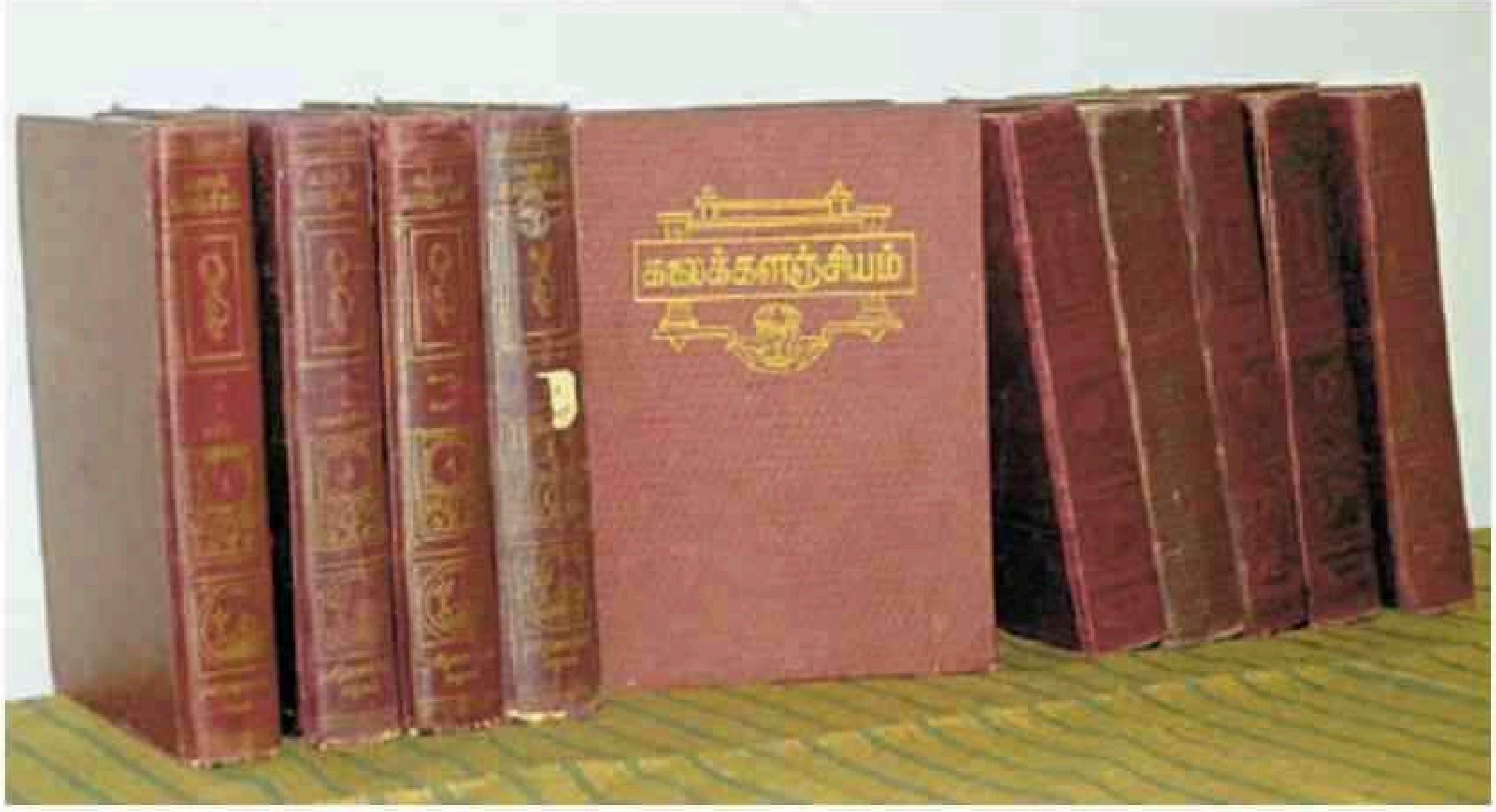
Like an archaeologist, he has excavated layer after layer of information about the processes that went into the making of this giant work, with great care, brushing the finds with sensitivity so as to reveal the tissues encrusted with decades of neglect and worse.

TAMIL SELF-IDENTITY

Gifted with an invaluable sense of modern Tamil history and of unparalleled expertise in—to use a Railways term—its "broad", "metre", and "narrow" gauges, Venkatachalapathy has done more than unveil the history of a lexicographic exercise. He has shown us a glimpse of modern Tamil Nadu's search for a cultural, intellectual, and aesthetic self-identity that stands, as it must, on the "outer" (to use another Railway term) of the main station where resides its geopolitical self-identity.

Venkatachalapathy's knowledge of similar lexicographic enterprises elsewhere in the world that gave the respective language-regions a sense of self-worth is manifest—French and Russian encyclopaedias are cited, as are those of Bangla, Odia, and Kannada.

A language and the region where it is spoken seek to see their knowledge horizons, measure their reach of the human mind's universal resources. An encyclopaedia is a lexical Olympiad in which the run, the throw, the catch, the grapple, the move, the speed, the length, the height, and—not the least important—the exact mark of a landing becomes a matter of more than satisfaction; it becomes an


WIKICOMMONS

KALAIKKALANJIYAM, the 10-volume Tamil encyclopaedia.

earnest matter of self-pride. What Shakespeare's language can do, what Moliere's can do, Dostoevsky's can do, surely that of the great Sangams can too. And not just "can do" but "has done" in its classical maturation by taking the language's subtle and yet austere probes to the globe's reservoir of experience, retrieving the finds in its own medium, and encasing them in its idiom, its script.

AVINASHILINGAM'S DREAM TEAM

This vision electrified the imagination of one beyond others: T.S. Avinashilingam, an unswerving, khadi-wearing nationalist of the Gandhian mould. This educationist, both as a Minister and a public intellectual with a no-nonsense frugality and probity in matters pertaining to funds, assembled a team led by a writer, journalist, and headmaster, Periaswamy Thooran, to commence and, with a stern task-mastering (and money-tight) but steady god as guide, carry to completion the monumental task.

The Government of India helped when it would, the State government when it could, and philanthropists whenever they found it possible, feasible, but almost never without gentle reminding. And sure enough, with many team members joining the ranks of the mortals on the other side of the Line of Life, the 10 volumes emerged in a decathlon of calibrated achievement.

Books about books are not unknown; but they are rare. This book is rare among the rare for it deals not with the preoccupations of a single author in the creation of a single text. It is about the work of a team working at the altar of universal knowledge where the priestess is a language that is both ancient and, in this exercise, is being called upon to be totally contemporary.

The "team" cast its net with an expert fling on the waters of knowledge to catch corals, shells, nodes of pure gold. Scientists like K.S. Krishnan joined in the effort. The naturalist M. Krishnan contributed entries on wildlife with his own pen-and-ink drawings of birds. And in a canny move, the team got C. Rajagopalachari to do the entry on Gandhism, courteously allowing the veteran more words than those given to others.

If the treasure trove gives Tamil readers a treat, its story gives all who read it beyond the shores of Tamil a repast. It tells them that Tamil is ancient, yes of course. It is classical, goes without saying. It is *not* an oyster-clasp that keeps its pearl to itself. It is a highly sensitive instrument that receives impulses naturally, stores and metabolises them organically. And it is by its nature incapable of anything narrow, small.

An example: the book has given by way of random illustrations specimen pages from the Encyclopaedia. Among them are two that contain entries each, on Beethoven and Premchand. I have not read anywhere a synoptically more deft and thematically more comprehensive description of the German composer of *First Symphony* and the Hindi genius who has given us *Godan*. No reader of Venkatachalapathy's nugget of a "book book" will close it without a deep breath of respect for Tamil lexicography and a deeper one for Tamil universalism.

I cannot take the reader's leave without referring to the author's literary finesse. One sample is his description of an earlier lexical enterprise that failed: "The history of Tamil literature is replete with tales of death, devastation, tsunamis, conflagration and termites. But even by the extraordinary standards of Tamil misfortune... ill-luck... puts this project right up there on the Olympian heights of books blighted by the kiss of death."

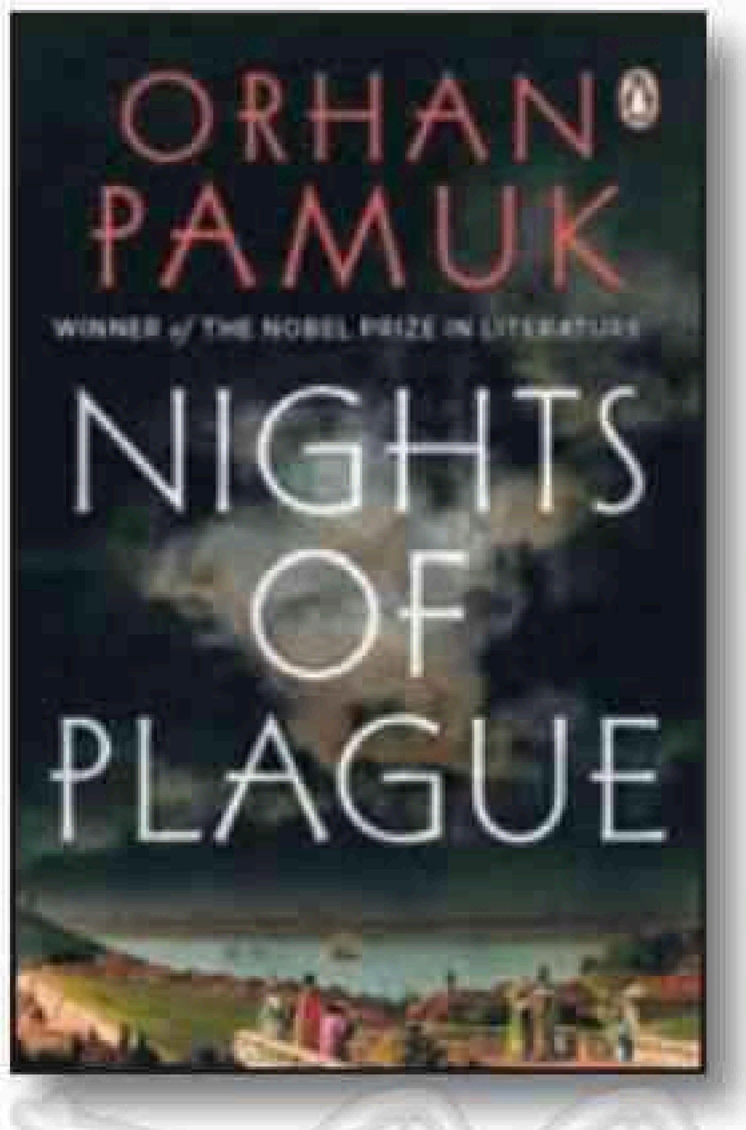
Kalaikkalanjiyam was touched by a different experience, long lost in the sealed cave of its own reclusion, and has now been led out by Venkatachalapathy to the light of a new awareness. ☐

Gopalkrishna Gandhi is a former administrator, diplomat, and Governor.

> The naturalist M. Krishnan contributed entries on wildlife with his own pen-and-ink drawings of birds. And in a canny move, the team got C. Rajagopalachari to do the entry on Gandhism.

A walk by the sea

Orhan Pamuk's new book is something of a crime mystery as well as a historical novel. BY **TABISH KHAIR**



Nights of Plague
By Orhan Pamuk
Translated by
Ekin Oklap
Penguin Hamish Hamilton, 2022
Pages: 704
Price: Rs.799

THE past is an even stranger country to contemporary writers and readers than it was to Leo Tolstoy and his contemporaries. It might be the consequence of the academic indexing of the genre of "historical fiction", or it might be due to the heavy surge of changes over the last hundred years which has left nothing recognisable, but almost all "historical novels" being written now seem awkwardly torn between the historian's urge to explain and the novelist's urge to narrate.

In *Nights of Plague*, Orhan Pamuk cannot resist either of these two urges, but being the accomplished writer that he is, he fashions a device to accommodate them. That device is the narrator of the novel, Mîna Mingher, who attaches a preface explaining how she, a historian, was "asked to annotate and prepare for publication one hundred and thirteen letters that Princess Pakize, third daughter of the thirty-third Ottoman sultan Murad V, had written to her older sister Hatice Sultan between 1901 and 1913". The novel, explains Mingher, grew out of that endeavour. The narrative device of Mingher enables Pamuk to mix information and discussion about the past with stories about the characters of the novel, even at times pre-empting the reader's curiosity and revealing the sad end of a particular character much before the event is reached in the novel.

Despite employing an academic historian as the narrator, the tone of much of the novel remains conversational and, if one may say so, vernacular. What one breathes in is not the stale air of a library. Instead, despite the terrors of plague and politics that inform the action, one is left with the feeling of having taken a leisurely, meandering walk along the sea when one finally finishes reading this 682-page novel. Whether this is the impression that Pamuk had intended might be open to question, because actually there are disturbing similarities between the story narrated and our own times: an epidemic, manipulative media, ignorant and superstitious reactions by the masses, resistance to quarantine rules, religious hatred, devious national and international politics, and, of course, ambitious leaders.

The novel begins in 1901 with the royal ship, *Azizye*, stealing into the harbours of Mingheria, a fictional island that Pamuk describes as the 29th state of the embattled Ottoman Empire. *Azizye* is on its way to China, carrying the newly married Princess Pakize and her husband, Doctor Nuri, who are intended to lead a "Caliphate" delegation to convince the Muslims of China to follow quarantine regulations. But it has detoured to Mingheria to drop Bonkowski Pasha, who is the Ottoman Emperor Sultan Abdul Hamid's royal chemist and trusted plague expert.

VIVEK BENDRE

There have been rumours of the plague having reached Mingheria, and Bonkowski Pasha has been deputed to verify it and fight it, if required. This is important for Sultan Hamid, as outbreaks of the plague, blamed on the Haj pilgrimage routes by the great powers of Europe, have been and can be used to barricade the Ottoman Empire or balkanise its outer states. Turkey is literally "the sick man of Europe". It is under pressure from the more "enlightened" European powers, even as commercial Haj ships from the British Empire bring cramped loads of starving, ailing and ill-treated pilgrims to Mecca, weakened by the voyage and susceptible to all kinds of illnesses, ranging from cholera outbreaks to the plague.

PLAGUE AND POLITICS

As half of Mingheria is Muslim and the other half belongs to the Greek Orthodox Church, Sultan Hamid fears that a plague outbreak on the island will cause him serious difficulties with European powers. The problems in

Mingheria are exacerbated by the existence of a religious sect led by a Muslim preacher who is highly resistant to scientific thought; frequent hostilities between Muslims and Christians; and a Governor who has for too long been playing short-term power politics by pitting groups and bandits against one another. When Bonkowski Pasha is murdered—is the crime committed by Muslims opposed to quarantine measures, locals who believe that Bonkowski, as a Europeanised agent, brought the plague with him, or agent provocateurs out to sabotage the Ottoman Empire?—Prince Pakize and her doctor husband are ordered to return to Mingheria. Doctor Nuri is not only Bonkowski Pasha's replacement in the fight against the epidemic but also expected to solve the murder mystery.

Pamuk's novel, then, is something of a crime mystery as well as a historical novel, though the former aspect, which usually craves much precision, fades against the expanse of its broad and meandering historical format.

Nights of Plague provides at times fascinating portraits of a strange time and a foreign land, and simultaneously reminds us how entirely familiar we are in our own totally different age with the fears, tensions, and forces narrated in it. Because Princess Pakize is actually Sultan Hamid's niece—her father was deposed by a coup of kingmakers many years ago and is kept confined to a palace by the Sultan—she becomes an interesting, and critical, commentator on the status quo from inside. As the novel proceeds, and the European powers impose their threatened barricade, the Major appointed as her bodyguard, who comes from the island, gets involved in nationalist stirrings which finally lead to the independence of the island.

There is an unusual amount of repetition in the novel. Some of this is obviously by choice, for Pamuk seems to want to convey an impression of the past as much more uncertain and open than it seems to be when recorded in history books: this requires a meandering narrative and some repetitiveness. At times though, the repetitiveness strikes one as odd, at least in English translation—for instance, when we are informed twice within 10 lines that Princess Pakize was less pretty than her older sisters. As noted earlier, one is left with the impression of a leisurely walk by the seaside: terrible waves do crash in our hearing, but strangely they do not disturb us. We turn one page after another, stopping a bit here, walking a bit faster there. This feeling left me partly dissatisfied, but it might not be a bad thing given the "literary" tenor of the times: it might actually get *Nights of Plague* many more readers. ☐

Tabish Khair is an Indian novelist and academic who teaches in Denmark.

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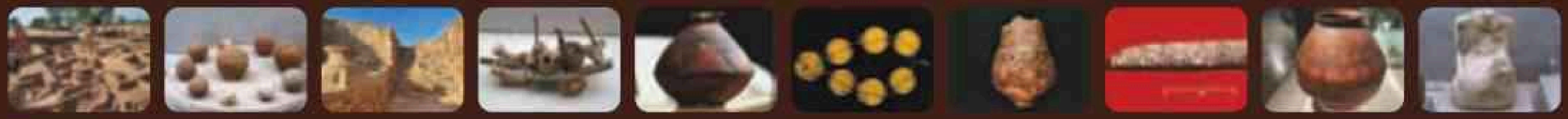

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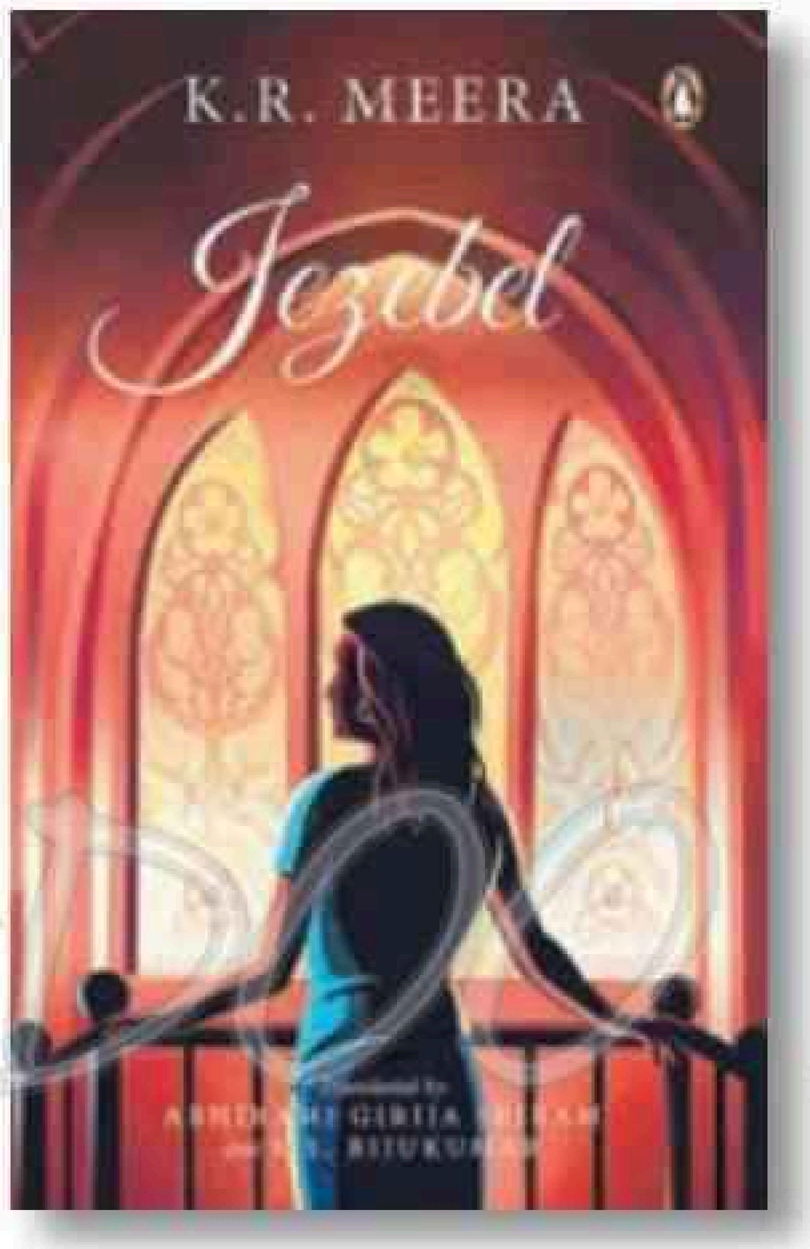
The other half

K.R. Meera's novel, *Jezebel*, translated from Malayalam, portrays how patriarchal social norms wield an inordinate amount of power over women and restrict their ability to exercise agency and achieve self-determination. BY **SHUMA RAHA**



Jezebel
By K.R. Meera
Translated by
Abhirami Girija
Sriram and
K.S. Bijukumar
Penguin Hamish
Hamilton, 2022
Pages: 400
Price: Rs.599

K.R. MEERA'S latest novel, *Jezebel*, translated from Malayalam by Abhirami Girija Sriram and K.S. Bijukumar, is firmly rooted in the author's passion for highlighting the way women find themselves perennially constrained by the limits that patriarchy imposes on them. Indeed, the work is a testament to the fact that even in this modern age, in India at least, patriarchal social norms wield an inordinate power over women and restrict their ability to exercise their agency and achieve self-determination.

Jezebel, a young doctor with a brilliant academic record, agrees to a prospective match after just one meeting and an email exchange with the man in question. The groom's father seems obnoxious right from the outset, but despite some misgivings, Jezebel goes ahead with the wedding because she figures that she will have to get married anyway, and this man, Jerome George Marakkaran, seems decent enough and appears to share her liking for Kahlil Gibran.

But her colossal misjudgment becomes clear on her wedding night. Her husband turns out to be brutish and insensitive, and, in fact, loathes reading. He forces her to perform fellatio on him and shows no interest in her otherwise.

When she goes to her marital home, her father-in-law, George Jerome Marakkaran, shows his true colours too. A malevolent and sadistic tyrant, he makes snide remarks about Jezebel's academic achievements, ridicules her name (the biblical Jezebel is commonly regarded as a harlot), and tells her that she will have to abide by his rules, which extends even to a ban on using sanitary napkins since cloths and rags are the menstrual articles of choice in the Marakkaran household.

Even when Jezebel and her husband return to her home town, where she is to pursue her MD, Jerome does not consummate their relationship. He takes away her stipend, and even assaults her on occasion. And yet she remains locked in this loveless, sexless, and abusive relationship, paralysed by the thought of what society will say if she were to seek a separation. Then, two and a half years later, Jerome meets with a car crash and falls into a coma.

It could have been a happy end to Jezebel's troubles. But she still has her baleful father-in-law to contend with. George Marakkaran accuses her of having engineered the accident to murder Jerome and demands that she gives up her studies to take care of him. For the first time, however, Jezebel puts her foot down. She goes ahead and writes her MD exam and refuses to sacrifice her life to look after a husband who did not give her a day's happiness.

Her father-in-law continues to malign her, charging her with having clandestine affairs, and tries to trap her in criminal cases such as drug peddling, attempted murder, and so on. Finally, Jezebel files for divorce. And it is the proceedings at the family court and the hostile questions that are directed at her there that punctuate the entire narrative, propelling it to unspool her traumatic story.

SOCIAL EXPECTATION

While the author deftly juxtaposes the courtroom scenes with the narrative of Jezebel's intolerable marriage and her gradual emergence from the shackles of social expectation, her attempt to add symbolic heft to the novel with frequent allusions to the biblical Jezebel is less successful.

Again and again, Jezebel, the protagonist, harks back to her namesake, Jezebel, the queen of Jezreel, cursed by the Prophet Elijah, eventually eaten by dogs, and regarded as the very epitome of an immoral woman in

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दैनिक जागरण, राजस्थान पत्रिका, दैनिक भास्कर, हिंदुस्तान, नवभारत टाइम्स, बिज़नस स्टैंडर्ड, अमर उजाला,पंजाब केसरी, उत्तम हिन्दू, जनसत्ता, लोकसत्ता, हरिभूमि, द पायनीयर,जागरूक टाइम्स, राष्ट्रीय सहारा, दैनिक ट्रिब्यून, युवा गोरव, भारतीय सहारा, स्वंतंत्र वार्ता, सीमा संदेश, दैनिक सवेरा,एक्शन इंडिया, मदरलैंड वॉइस, देशबंधु, हिमाचल दस्तक,

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popular culture. She seems to split her own self, at once identifying with the mythical queen and entering into a dialogue with her. (She also draws an equivalence between her evil father-in-law and the Prophet Elijah.)

However, instead of imbuing the narrative with metaphorical significance, the device feels like a force-fit—a clunky and gratuitous artifice that does little to add an element of transcendence to the story about a young doctor in Kerala who finds herself in the maw of patriarchy at its most vicious.

THULASI KAKKAT

K.R. MEERA. Readers of Meera's earlier works such as *Qabar* will find this book's prose disconcerting. Her usual lyricism and felicity with the language are missing.

GIVING VOICE

That story is worth telling, since even today thousands of girls and women in India see their ambitions extinguished, their potential ground underfoot, and their lives rigidly circumscribed by the diktats of husband and family.

In that sense, Meera's Jezebel certainly gives voice to those silent, suffering multitudes. The problem is, many of her actions and reactions do not seem credible, inconsistent as they are with the other elements of her characterisation.

We are told that Jezebel is exceptionally bright and an exam topper all through. She is also a practising doctor, respected by her peers, and financially independent. It beggars belief, therefore, that such a woman would meekly endure an abominable marriage because she fears divorce is frowned upon by church and society. Again, Meera makes it clear that though Jezebel's mother is a handmaiden of patriarchy, stern in her insistence that her duty to her husband overrides all else, her father and grandmother are liberal and humane and entirely on her side. Would Jezebel not have found support from them had she chosen to walk out of her marriage? In fact, it is they who encourage her to file for a divorce later.

> While the author deftly juxtaposes the courtroom scenes with the narrative of Jezebel's marriage, her attempt to add symbolic heft to the novel is less successful.

WITLESS MASOCHIST?

What is even more baffling is that Jezebel is racked by guilt after she decides not to dedicate her life to the care of the comatose Jerome, a man who abused her and was husband to her in name only.

"Was he a good husband to me?" she asks herself. "Did he give me all that I wanted?" she wonders, making us wonder, in turn, if she is really just a witless masochist who somehow lucked out and managed to pass all those tough medical exams.

Indeed, a vein of improbability and exaggeration runs right through the novel. It is evident in the depiction of Jezebel's father-in-law, a man so unremittingly diabolic that he seems to be a caricature rather than a real person; it is evident in the courtroom scenes where the lawyer's questions to Jezebel are so grossly offensive and anti-women, that it is astonishing that they are mostly allowed without objection; and it is evident most of all in the way Jezebel, an educated and accomplished modern young woman, seems to be in thrall to the antiquated social convention that decrees that marriage is an everlasting bond, nay, a cross, which must be borne by the woman even if she gets crucified as a result.

And then there is the prose. Readers of Meera's earlier works such as *Qabar* will find *Jezebel* disconcerting on that score. Instead of lyricism and a certain felicity with the language, what we get are sentences like these: "She could feel pieces of her heart fume and burn, flames flaring up in every breath she exhaled, and her flesh smouldering in pain like wet firewood." There are many such flesh-burning and bone-melting passages in the book.

The pain of womanhood, and the atrocious demands that society tends to make on women, cannot be overemphasised. Sadly, overemphasis rarely makes for good literature. ☐

Shuma Raha is a journalist and author.

Congratulations

By Bindu Bhatt

Translated from the Gujarati by Rita Kothari

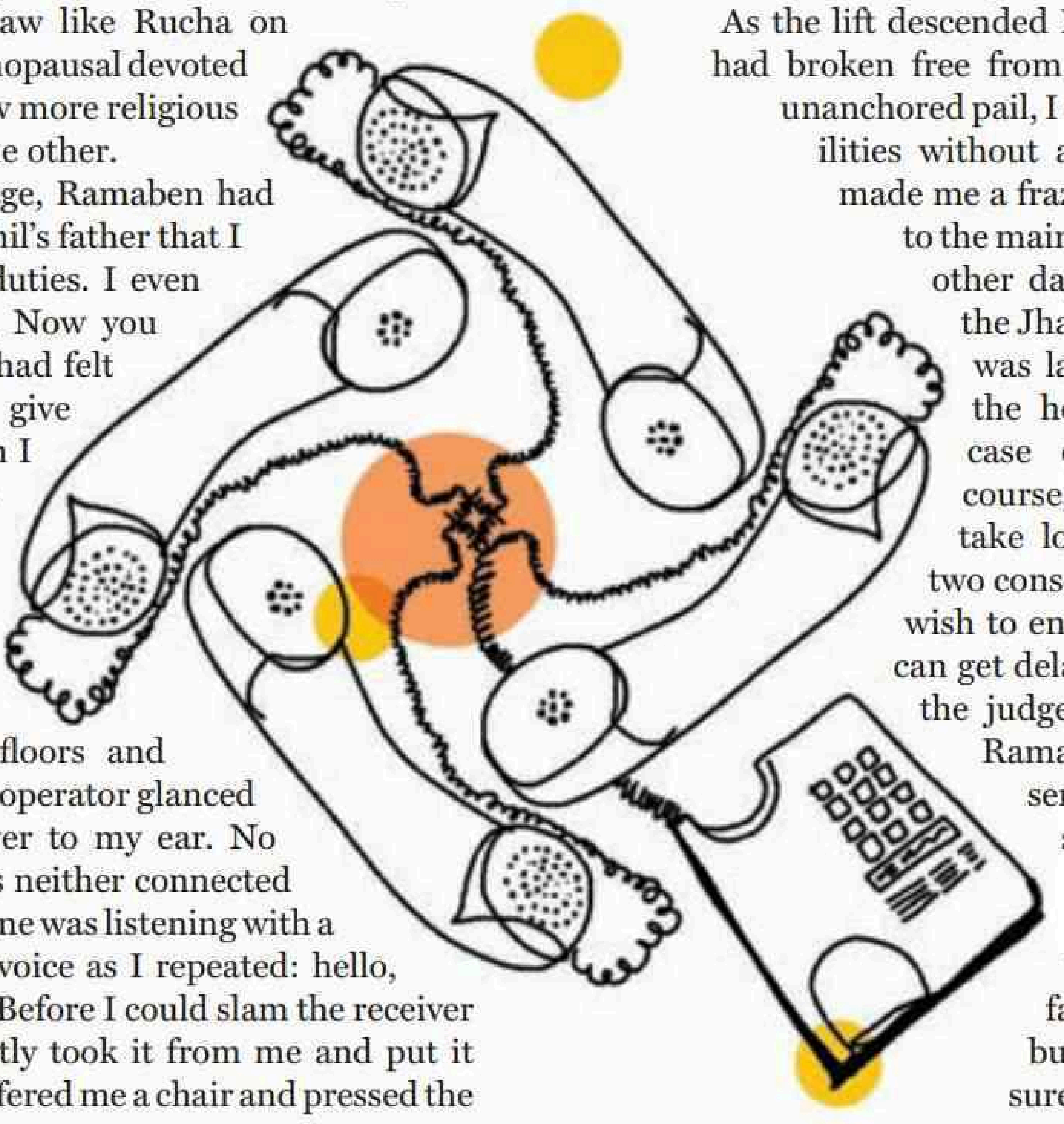
IT WAS PAST FIVE WHEN I LEFT THE OFFICE. By the time I cleared my table, the elevator had gone down. Five floors down and up again to where I was. Then down five floors again to reach the ground floor. Gripping the folds of my sari and minding the railing, I raced downstairs. Anyone watching me would have thought this woman is being chased by a ghost. On the third floor, I heard Ahmed chacha calling, "Mehtaben, phone for you."

Who could that be? Prashant? But he would only return at six-thirty. Unusual for him to call at this time. Had something happened? I chided myself for thinking like I had been doing for the past six months. What's the worst that could happen? In the last ten years, I had managed to remain unfazed by everyone—family, neighbours, office. What's left now? And let's just say that no decision has been made—so what? But Prashant—will he be able to prevail against his family? A dominating and combative daughter-in-law like Rucha on the one hand and the menopausal devoted wife, Ramaben, who grew more religious as each day passed, on the other.

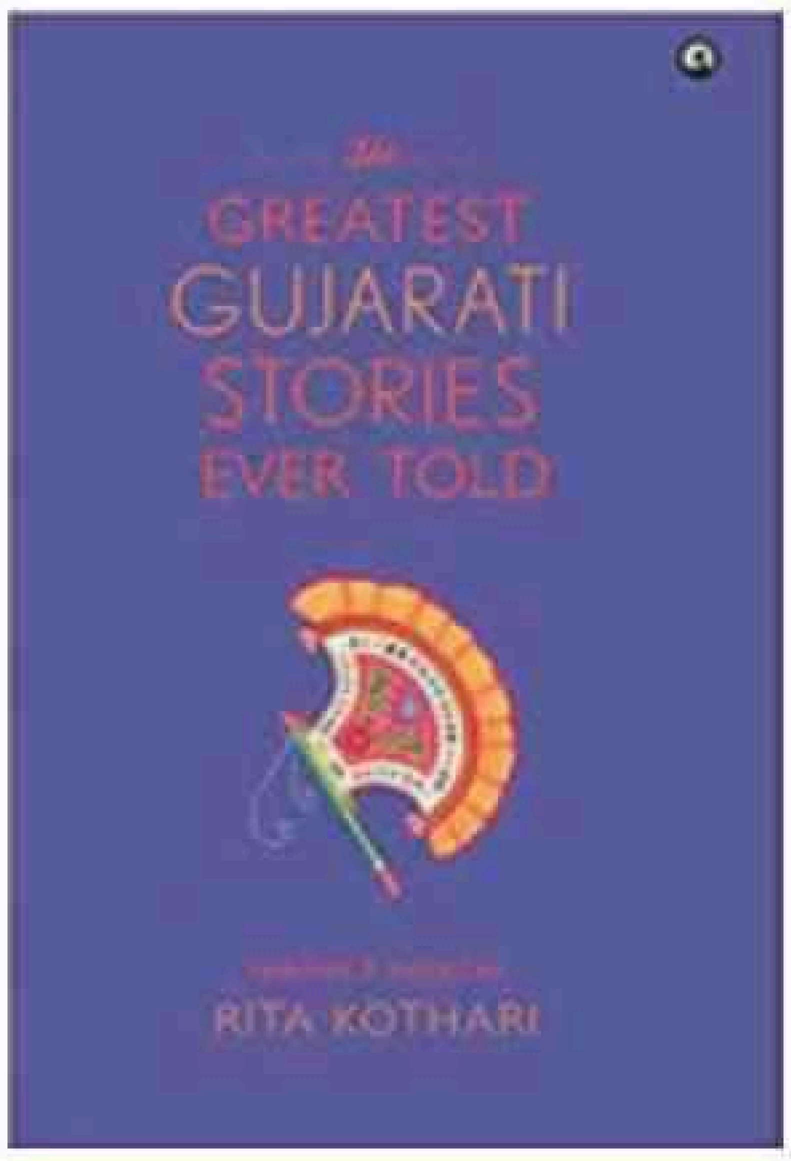
After Nikhil's marriage, Ramaben had told me, "I have told Nikhil's father that I have completed all my duties. I even have a daughter-in-law. Now you take care of yourself!" I had felt like asking her to give Prashant to me. But then I thought, when has she ever refused me? In fact, she had honoured my opinion even while choosing Rucha as her daughter-in-law.

I climbed down two floors and picked up the phone; the operator glanced at me. I held the receiver to my ear. No response. The phone was neither connected nor disconnected. Someone was listening with a sly smile to my panting voice as I repeated: hello, hello. I was exasperated. Before I could slam the receiver down, the operator quietly took it from me and put it back on the cradle. She offered me a chair and pressed the bell for water to be brought for me. But I promptly stood up. What if a voice used to commanding now sounded plaintive?

I nearly ran to catch the elevator but realised that the lift was going up. The liftman was staring at me. I took out a handkerchief from my purse and wiped his gaze away. Along with the kerchief, my hands had grabbed an invitation card from my purse. It was for the closing ceremony of a handloom workshop. I wanted to go, but without Prashant, it didn't seem much fun doing anything. He wasn't around today. These days, he looked crushed. I can't stop thinking about Ramaben. I fear that his guilt about me is weighing him down. Yesterday, on the phone, "Yeah, everything's fine. After all this suffering, if you are able to accept our friendship, it's more than enough." I cannot manage his kind of equanimity. I become anxious very easily these days. It could be a trivial matter, but I weave a spider's web.



As the lift descended I felt like a pail that had broken free from its pulley. Like an unanchored pail, I managed responsibilities without any support. It had made me a frazzled person. I came to the main road, and like every other day I walked towards the Jhaveriwaad bus stop. I was late once again. Was the hearing of the court case over by now? Of course, these things don't take long when there are two consenting partners who wish to end a marriage. But it can get delayed if the lawyer or the judge is absent. Or say, Ramaben herself is absent. Or, God forbid, she raises an objection. Well, she hasn't uttered a word of protest so far. But what if she buckled under pressure from Rucha? I



mean, I have always been beholden to her. What then...

Prashant often complains, "The moment I step into the house, I feel hemmed in by the ugly atmosphere." When this happens, I defend Ramaben. "She looks after you so well though. Feeds you, takes care of you. And look at your home, it shines like a mirror. She keeps it so tidy." He'd react violently, "Oh please, even hotels do that much. It'd be all right if one didn't have all the conveniences in the world. But I can't understand why she wouldn't look beyond herself, at me, for instance. You know, this situation is like a hand-woven rug. It may disintegrate, but it won't give up its coarseness. What kind of life is this? An acclaimed expert on traditional Indian handicrafts at work, and mired in the universe of narrow community and family circles at home. Stifling. Had you not been around...."

Arre! I collided with a country bumpkin. He barely heard me apologise before asking, "What eez time?" Five-forty-five, I told him, and hailed an autorickshaw. This was no time to brood. By six-fifteen, I should be home, far away in Pritam Nagar, threading through Relief Road and the Nehru Bridge traffic.

The clamour of menacingly close vehicles! The autorickshaw made its way, the driver employing part chicanery, part strategy, brushing against something, and almost toppling over. My eyes closed, and my hands moved to my ears to block the noise. I simply cannot and will not drive; how do you hold a steering wheel when you're so faint-hearted? Never mind your own, but you can't jeopardise other people's lives, can you? I have thought about this before, why am I thinking about this now? I felt like jumping out and running home. What could have happened? If everything had gone well...then what follows? What am I going to do? God knows. My chest sounded as hollow as an empty thermos flask. Just then I saw a hoarding: Gujarat Handicraft Haat. A sale was on.

This was where I had first met Ramaben.

There had been a sale on that day as well. The previous day I had made plans to shop with Prashant. I waited for three whole hours, and finally went on my own. The moment I entered the haat, I noticed Prashant at the silk counter. I was going to burst like a pressure cooker. You, you... I was ready to scream. Before I could say anything, Prashant placed his hand on the shoulder of a woman standing next to him and said, "Rama, look at that one." Oh! So we are with Shrimatiji today. I must turn back, I had thought. This was the woman about whom I knew everything. Every single thing. She specialises in making mohanthaal and khaman. She would not step outside her home until she had lit the diya. She hated the colour white. Arre, I even knew that she does not like night lamps. But she does not even know my name.

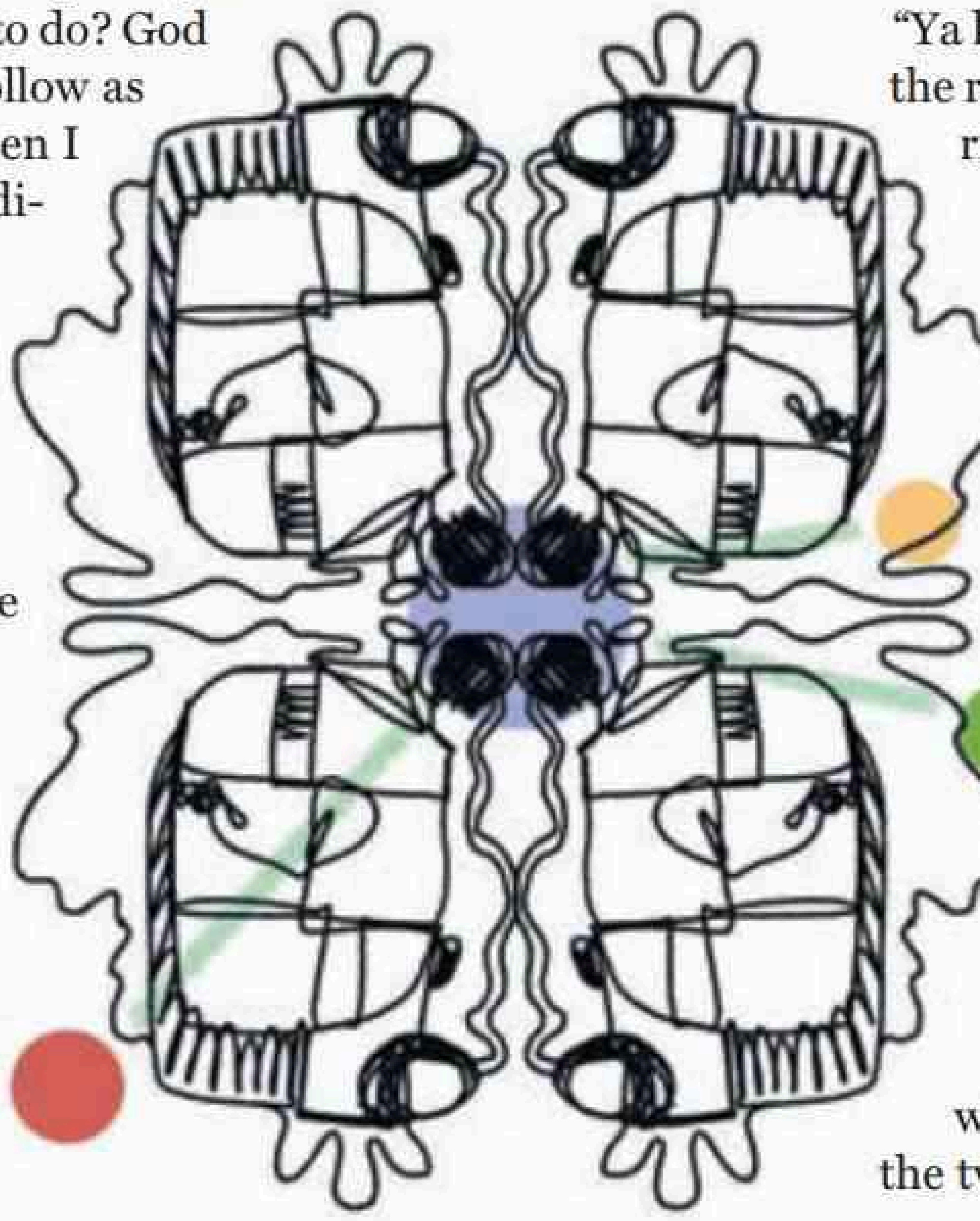
"Rama, take this one." I noticed that Prashant's hand was on a beautiful kosa fabric. I wanted to put my hand on his. Ramaben's jarring voice brought me back to reality, "Oh no, I don't want to wear an old woman's sari." Had she noticed how Prashant smiled when he found a colour he liked? You want to steal that smile away! Prashant was saying, "Come on, take it. Even if you wear it only once, it's still worth it."

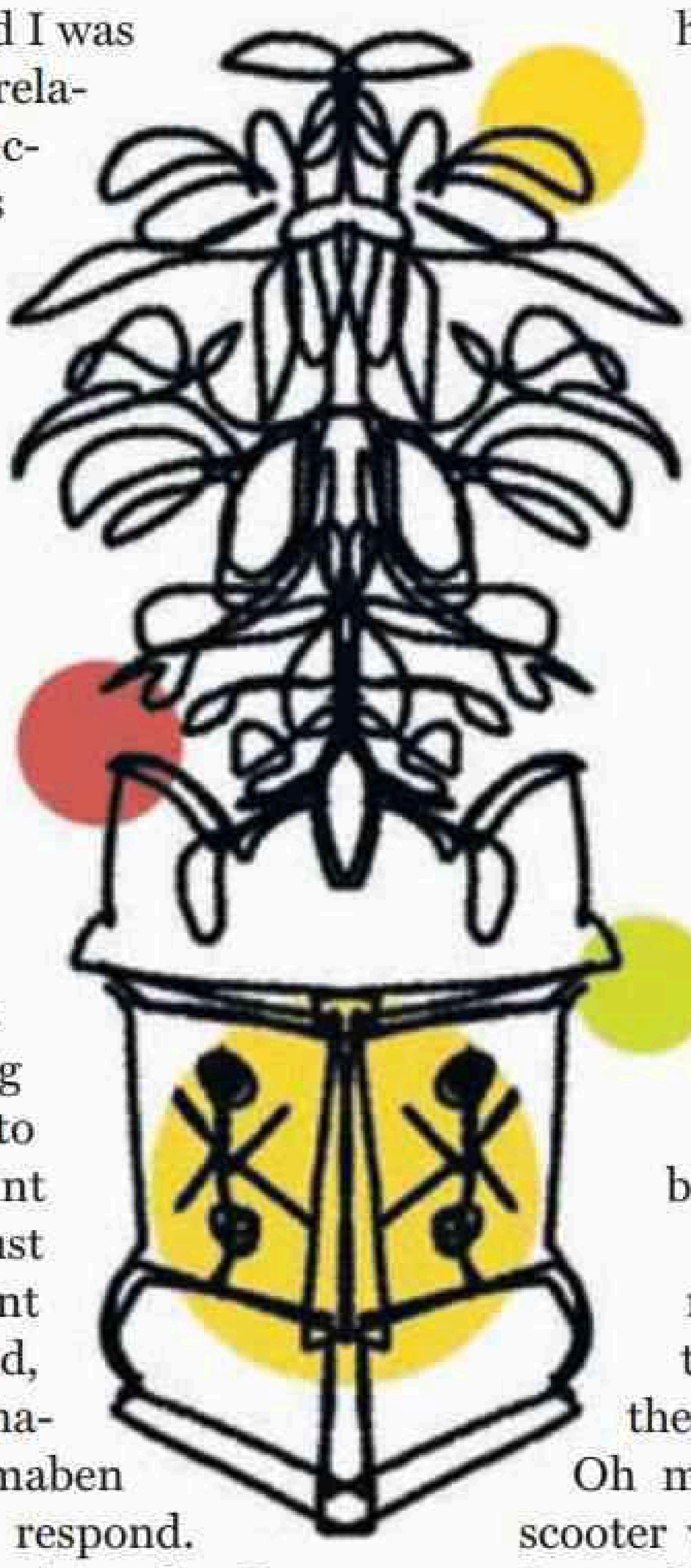
"Look at you," she said. "Throwing away 800 rupees like that? Had it not been for me, your style, your attitude..." She kept talking but Prashant had turned away from her towards me. "Arre, Mehta? You are here. Rama, come here. Let me introduce you to Padmajaben. She's the purchase officer in our office. Like you, she also goes to all kinds of shops." He had smiled wanly.

Ramaben had been joyous, like a blind person who could suddenly see. She said to me, "I had to drag him here, he just wouldn't come."

From that day on, Ramaben took me along whenever she went shopping. The first time I went to their home, Ramaben talked about her son, Nikhil, and the snacks she had prepared. Nikhil must have been in the fifth standard then. He had looked at my light-coloured eyes, and decided to call me Bhoori aunty. Prashant would watch all three of us. He was like a solitary tree on the banks of a river. I stood apart, safe in his shade.

"Ya khuda!" Though he was a veteran of the roads, these words slipped out of the rickshawallah's mouth. A middle-aged woman riding a two-wheeler had a close shave with a bus. Thank God, she was saved—saved or saved up for something worse? I can't make up my mind any more about whether whatever happens is for the good, or if it's only in preparation for something worse to come. The traffic came to a standstill near Vijlighar. Two city buses waited side by side, almost rubbing shoulders with each other. When this happens and I find myself looking into the window of a bus, I wonder which of the two buses I am sitting in.





There was a time when I had decided I was going to have an entirely professional relationship with Prashant. Ramaben's affection and trust made me feel like I was doing something illegitimate, and the guilt almost killed me. It was like being complimented on wearing somebody's hand-me-down sari: it left me feeling diminished. She did not even hint that she knew what was going on. If she received an invitation to an art or cultural exhibition she'd say, "For you and him. You both are different. I don't like all this."

When Nikhil cleared his twelfth standard with good grades, Prashant made plans to take the family out for a movie, and dinner afterwards. Prashant and I had been sitting together during lunch when Ramaben phoned. She said to him, "I cannot come. I have to visit my aunt who has come from London. She has just lost someone close to her." Prashant handed the receiver to me. She continued, "Why don't you do one thing, take Padmajaben instead of me. I'm hanging up." Ramaben hadn't even waited for Prashant to respond. Prashant sat across from me, and held out his palm. I gently put my hand in his.

"Should I go via Nehru Bridge or Lakkadia Bridge?" The rickshawallah asked me.

"Nehru Bridge," I replied.

Sometimes Prashant would get emotional and say, "Padma, we are like two banks of a river." I'd stop him from saying anything further and say, "Prashant, there's a strong bridge connecting us. Never mind if the waters rise." Last year, I was transferred to the Ashram Road branch. The office people must have thought, at least this will separate them. But Ramaben would call every now and then, leading to shopping expeditions in Kalaniketan, Deepkala and Asopalav. The office people didn't know where to hide their sheepish faces. With Nikhil's wedding, every wagging tongue came to a halt.

But what if the bridge breaks today? What if the banks are able to meet each other now, unmediated? An empty expanse unfolded before my eyes. I felt like asking the rickshaw to turn back. But what if someone calls me at home? What if Prashant comes home? No, I can't abandon him like that. Whatever will be, will be. Was God watching all this? The God of Sanyaas Ashram on Ashram Road?

> Ramaben's affection and trust made me feel like I was doing something illegitimate, and the guilt almost killed me.

Ramaben must have disrupted her routine today. Every morning Prashant would drop her on his two-wheeler at Sanyaas Ashram, perhaps Rucha will take her today. My own niece, and yet she couldn't understand! I had assumed after going to a medical school, she must have ceased to be like her mother; she must have learned to understand not only human anatomy but also the human heart. I had thought an architect like Nikhil should have a doctor as his wife, and that would give Prashant's family a fresh beginning in society. But Rucha asked the question that Ramaben had not bothered asking: "What will people say?"

"Ben," the rickshawallah was saying to me. "Ben, what is to be done? There is a traffic jam at Pritam Nagar. Looks like there has been an accident." Was it Prashant? Oh my God, he must have been riding his scooter with all that anxiety. I ran towards the spot. I saw a bus and rickshaw in the distance, and felt relieved. But the next moment I felt ashamed of myself. The bus stood in the middle of the road, blocking the entire road. There was a body on the road: it was that of a middle-aged woman. I ran back to the rickshaw. I told the driver to go via the Lakkadiya Pul underpass. I almost forgot to breathe. My legs shook. I kept my eyes shut.

A corpse before the rickshaw—spread-eagled, lips half-open and eyes wide-open. A gold bangle on each wrist. Scattered beads of a tulsi mala next to the body. I was walking over this body. There was shifting dark shapes around it. Swarms of vultures and crows hovered over the corpse. I kept asking the rickshawallah to go faster. I slid my glass bangles into my purse. A vehicle passing next to me blared its horn and startled me. A crowd of people chased me, chanting, catch her, catch her...

I wanted to get home as soon as possible. Before the dead body was wrapped in Ramaben's patola sari, I needed to be home.

"Ben, your house number?" the rickshawallah asked.

"Fifty-four. Yes, yes, fifty-four." I wiped my spectacles with my kerchief and noticed my neighbour who was shifting houses arranging all her plants in a lorry. One of them was a tulsi plant. Someone stood at my gate. I paid the rickshawallah and made to open the gate to my house. The person standing at my gate placed his hand upon mine. It was Prashant. He said softly, "Congratulations."

I tried to remember who he was, and blurted out, "For what?" □

Story selected by Mini Krishnan
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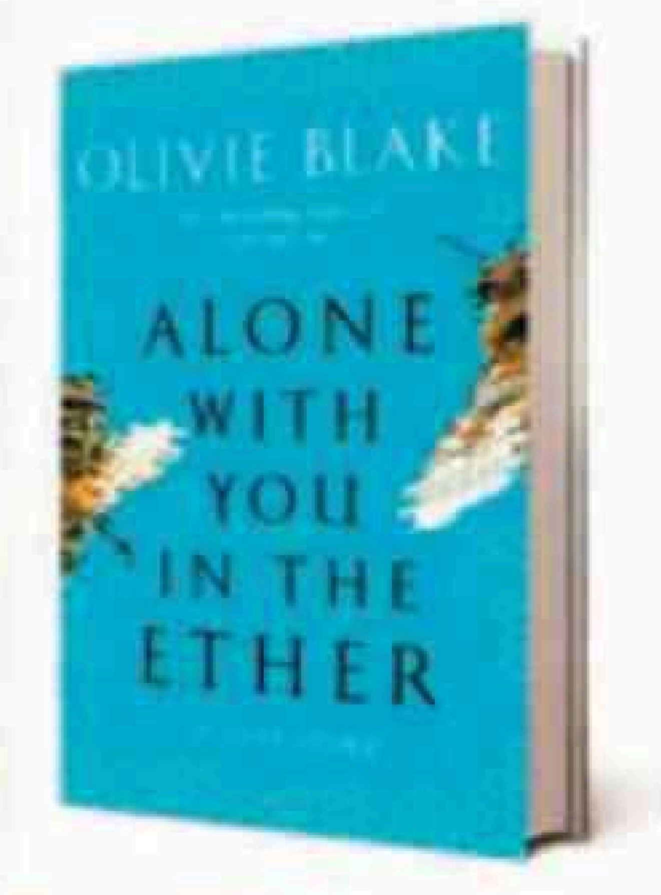
Illustrations by Siddharth Sengupta



Alone With You in the Ether

Olivie Blake

Tor

Rs.650

In this unusual romance, two obsessive, eccentric personalities with serious mental health issues struggle to be without each other from the moment they meet. The deeper they fall in love, the more troubling their reliance on each other becomes.

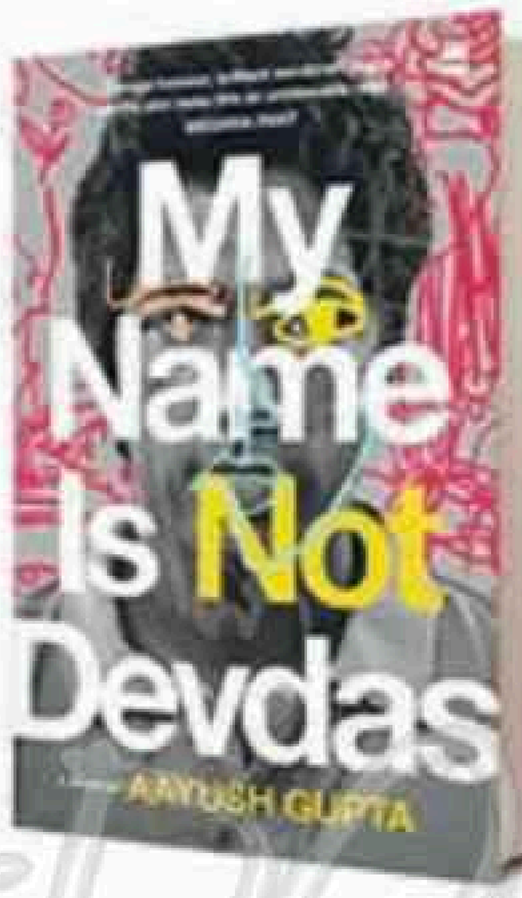
My Name Is Not Devdas

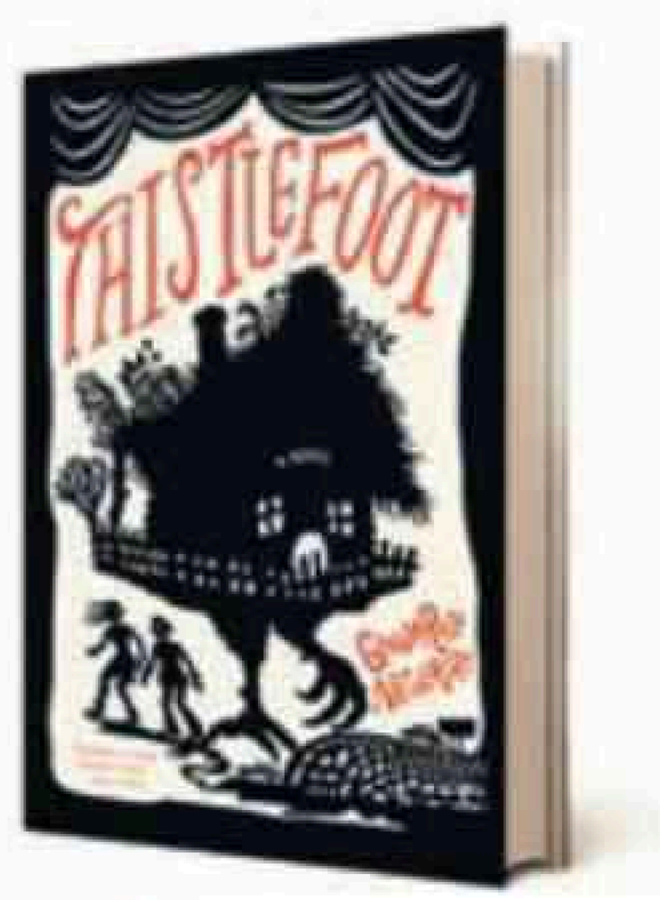
Aayush Gupta

HarperCollins India

Rs.399

What if Devdas was a woke Marxist? What if Paro was an entrepreneurial capitalist? What if Chandramukhi was the daughter of a jailed separatist? In this retelling of the classic set in contemporary times, three characters traverse the ideologically divided landscape of Delhi's college campuses.





Thistlefoot

Genna Rose Nethercott

Anchor

$28

In this novel in the tradition of modern fairy tales, the estranged Yaga siblings are reunited after receiving a mysterious inheritance—a sentient house on chicken legs. It takes off from Eastern European folklore to tell a story of multigenerational trauma.

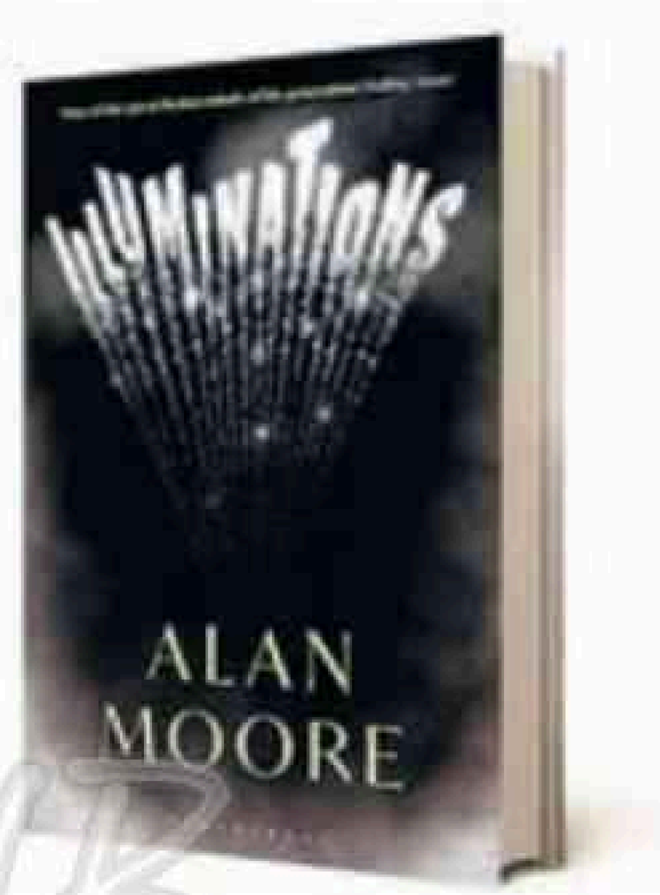
Illuminations

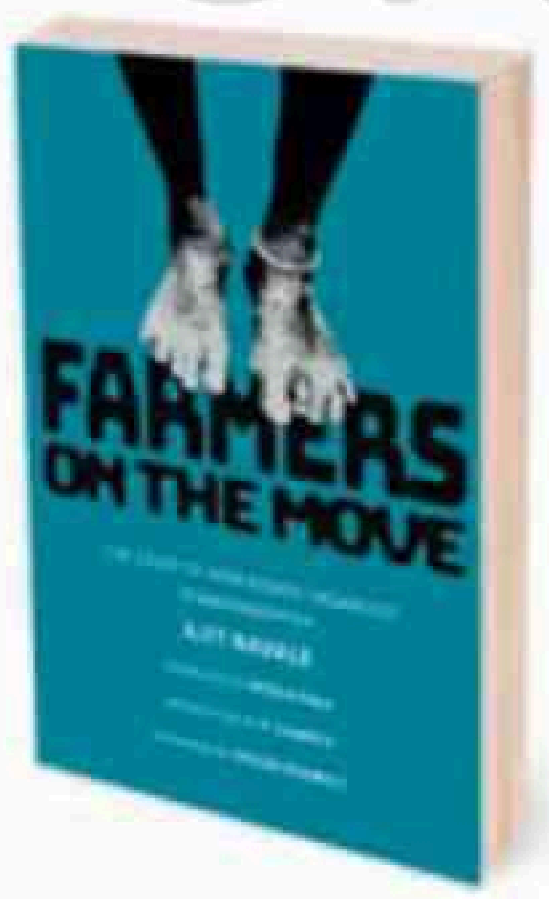
Alan Moore

Bloomsbury Publishing

Rs.699

Each of the short stories in this book ends with some kind of illumination or realisation. From the four horsemen of the apocalypse to the Boltzmann brain thought experiment fashioning the universe at the Big Bang, comic book writer Alan Moore's tales are about the power of imagination and magic.





Farmers on the Move

The Story of how Kisans organised in Maharashtra

Ajit Navale, translated by Medha Kale

LeftWord

Rs.375

A chronicle of the tactics and strategy that went into organising the Kisan Long March in March 2018, when 40,000 farmers marched 182 kilometres from Nashik to Mumbai. A moving story of human tenacity and the triumph of the spirit.

Founding Mothers of the Indian Republic

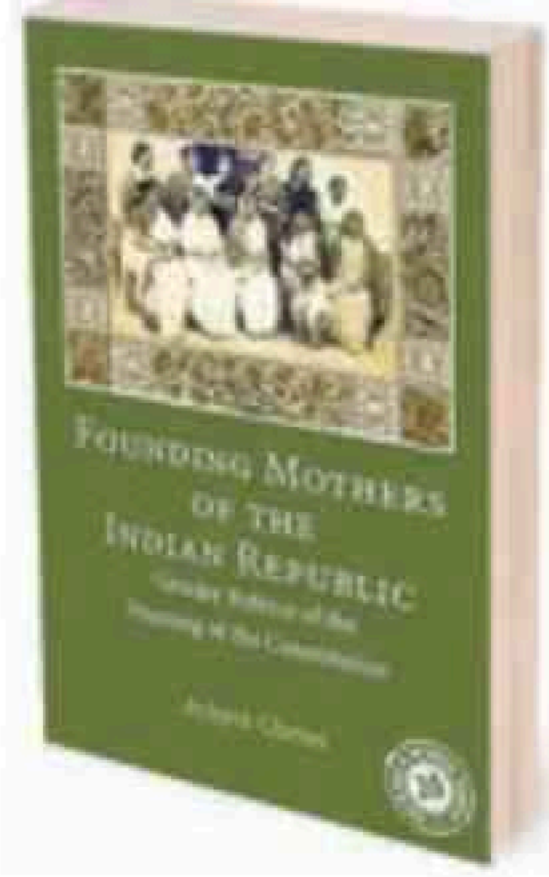
Gender Politics of the Framing of the Constitution

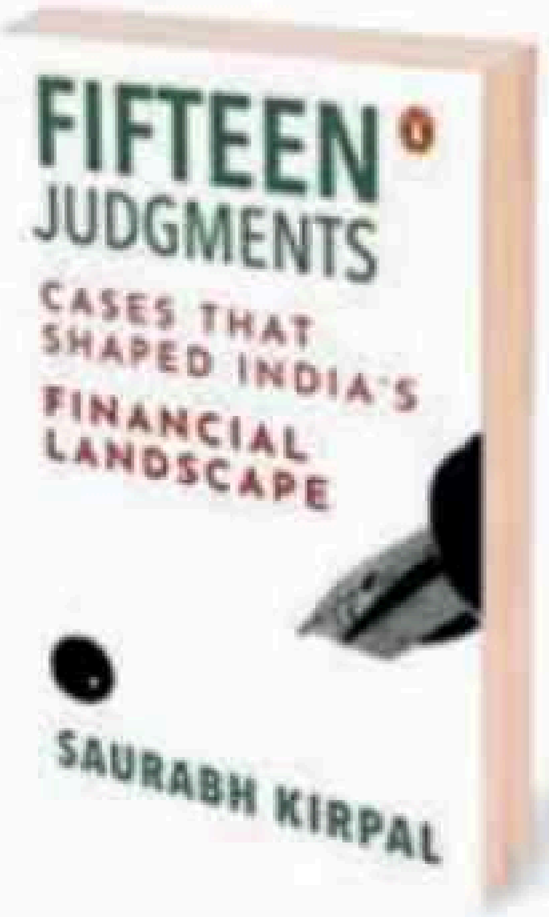
Achyut Chetan

Cambridge University Press

Rs.1,095

Demolishing the prejudices attached with the phrase "founding fathers", this book shows how women members of the Indian Constituent Assembly co-authored a Constitution shaped by feminist politics.





Fifteen Judgments

Cases that Shaped India's Financial Landscape

Saurabh Kirpal

India Portfolio

Rs.599

An analysis of 15 judgments that trace the long path of India's economic history, and an attempt to demystify some of the legal issues in the world of finance for the common reader.

South vs North

India's Great Divide

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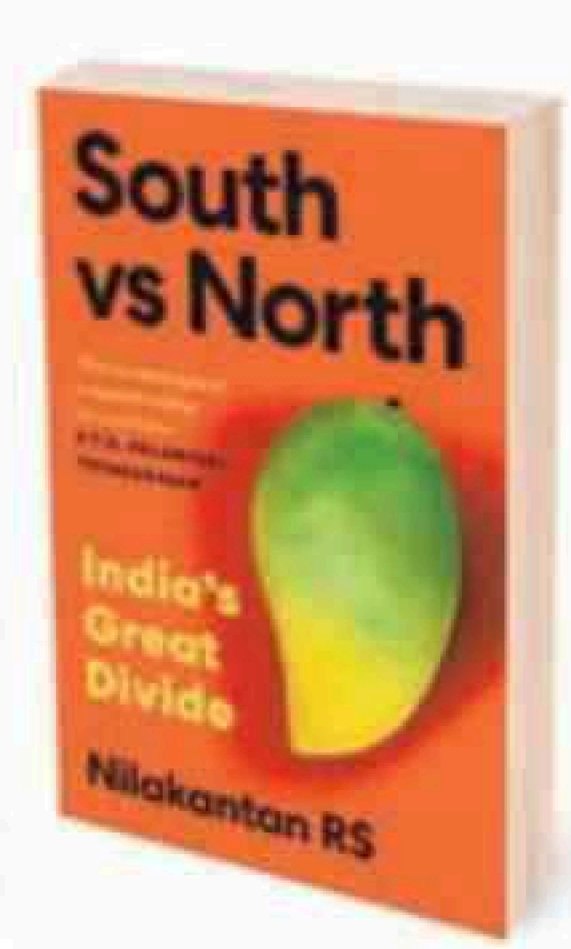
A data scientist shows us how and why the southern States are outperforming the rest of the country in this book about one of the biggest challenges that an increasingly centralised India faces today.



Melbourne
← Cricket Ground
← Melbourne Park

Australia Diary

Of cricket, cliches, and lost souls

AUSTRALIA, specifically its cricket, conjures up memories of bleary-eyed December mornings spent in front of the television watching images from Down Under. Vast grounds, blue skies, Richie Benaud on air, and seagulls flying when batters essayed their drives, were all part of the mix. As another airborne journey took this writer to Bangkok and from there to Melbourne, it was time to chronicle the willow game's latest attraction: the ICC Twenty20 World Cup.

India against Pakistan, invested with history, is cricket's great clash, perhaps a touch below the Ashes that features England against Australia in Tests. Melbourne, with its high-rises, parks, and the Rod Laver Tennis Arena, geared up on October 23 for the contest between the subcontinental neighbours. At the Melbourne Cricket Ground, with boisterous Indian and Pakistani fans cheering their respective teams, the atmosphere turned electric.

Sport is often described as war minus the shooting, but it can also blur the Radcliffe Line. A fan held a placard that said: "Virat Kohli please come to Pakistan and score a hundred." Through the game, the stands were throbbing with adrenalin, and on a special night, Kohli played a stunning innings, an unbeaten 82 that snatched victory from the jaws of defeat.

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Taxi rides throw up distinct tales that tug at the heart. Shahid Khan, hailing from Afghanistan and settled in Australia, asked: "Where from?" When told that his passengers were sports writers from India, Shahid's enthusiasm quadrupled. Talk veered towards India being his country's friend and then his voice quivered: "You guys will go back to your country after the World Cup, what about people like us? Every night when I get back home, there is this knowledge that our real home is far away, and with all that is happening there with the Taliban, we may never get back. There is also the guilt: the family and I are here but what about our countrymen in Kabul or across the Afghan countryside. I may smile but I am never happy. I keep thinking about my country; it was a great country and now it is a mess."

Displacement is not just about people leaving for other countries, it is also at times a traumatic internal movement. Australia's original inhabitants, the Aborigines, exist on the fringes in a country that has been populated by European stock ever since England sent its people across at a time when the sun never set on its empire. Successive governments have tried to integrate the Aborigines, and Jason Gillespie is the most famous Australian indigenous cricketer. Yet out on the streets, if you see visible poverty, it will be through an Aborigine hanging around near convenience stores, eateries, and pubs, making eye contact, at times asking for a dime, and often in a state of intoxication. They are the lost people in their own land, though quite a few have transitioned into prosperity, embracing Western education and moving up the value chain.

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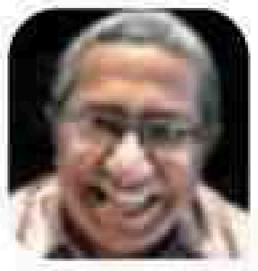
When people think about Australia, they tend to get fixated upon kangaroos, beer, and its great sporting ambassadors. Out on the roads, it is a different story as a significant percentage of Aussies love their fitness, and at any time of the day, be it in the sun, rain, or cold blustering winds, there will be a few on the run. Some do not walk their dogs; they just run man's best friend, and it is a lovely sight to see men, women, and a furry ball with a wagging tail out on the trot while a "howd'ya mate" is whispered.

***

Every New Year day will have this regular picture in most newspapers: fireworks greeting January 1 from the Sydney Harbour Bridge. One night, a few Indian cricket writers decided to meet the New Year cliche. A short cab ride took an eager bunch of writers to the spot, and selfies were taken, the bridge photographed, and it was time to quaff a frothy drink. The setting was gorgeous, and the sports hacks cracked inside jokes. At a far corner, two men were locked in an intimate embrace. A West Asian couple walked in on them, and then with a blush reddening their cheeks and eyes locked onto the pavement, they hurried away to the nearby Opera House stairs. There they sat, hands demurely clasped and whispered sweet nothings while the two men were lost in their world. Truly, love is a many-splendoured thing.

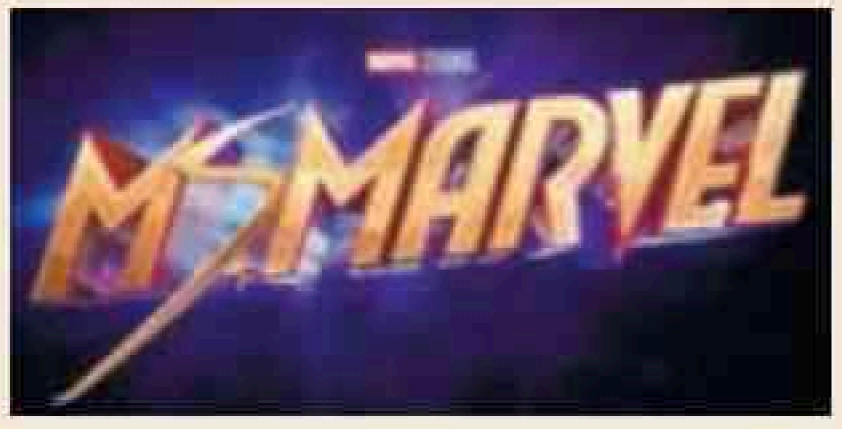
K.C. Vijaya Kumar is Sports Editor, The Hindu.

THE FRONTLINE QUIZ



Sumant Srivathsan
has a day job as a digital marketer, but his true calling is disambiguating football and soccer on the Internet.

1. What genre, named by Lewis Pollak in 2001 to describe his game "Children of the Sun", refers to works that combine the aesthetics of the inter-war 20th century with retro-futuristic technologies? Other examples include films such as *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*, novels like *Railsea* by China Mieville, and the "Bioshock" series of games.



2. One of the antagonists in the *Ms. Marvel* television series is a United States government organisation that was invented in Marvel Comics as a source of comic (heh) relief, and as a way to poke fun at its rival. It performed an essential service usually not depicted until this group got its own miniseries. What was it called and what did it do?

3. In architecture, this word refers to Moorish design. In Western classical music, the term describes melodies derived from Ottoman influences. In ballet, it is defined as "a body in profile, supported on one leg, the other leg extended at right angles to it, and arms held in various harmonious positions, with shoulders held square to the line of direction". Which word?

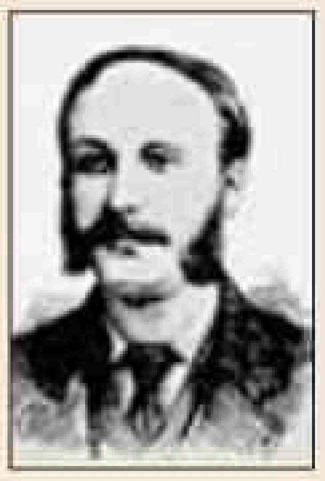
4. In 1930, The Bank of Manhattan Company—now J.P. Morgan Chase & Co.—purchased a pair of Wogdon and Barton products from the great-granddaughter of their original owner, John Baker Church. The products were used by the bank's founder and his benefactor, with expectedly tragic results. What were these items?

5. The first currency coins in Britain were issued by Offa of Mercia in the eighth century CE. The design of the coins was copied from gold dinars issued by the Abbasid Caliph al-Mansur. Since the die-cutter did not read Arabic, what inscription inadvertently appeared on these coins?

6. *Phallus indusiatus*, a fungus, is known by many names, but the most evocative one refers to the delicate white netting that surrounds the cap and the smell of rotting flesh that it uses to attract flies in order to spread its spores. What is the three-word name of this fungus?

7. This creation of V. Ganapati Sthapati, unveiled in 2000, stands at 133 ft in height, a reference to the subject's most significant work, estimated to be from the fifth century CE, addressing issues of honour, wealth, and love. What is this monumental undertaking which took 25 years to come to fruition?

8. The Sacred Band of Thebes was an elite military group of 300 men that was constituted by the General Gorgidas purely on the basis of skill and merit, regardless of social class, as was the norm of the time. The composition of the group was unique in that it was constituted in pairs, an older *erastes* and a younger *eromenos*. What do these words mean, an integral part of the recruitment process?



9. John Graham Chambers was a Welsh sportsman who rowed for Cambridge, founded an amateur athletic club, rowed beside Matthew Webb across the English Channel, and edited a national newspaper. His most significant contribution to sports is known by the name of another man, John S. Douglas, who endorsed it in public. What did Chambers do?

10. Quadball is a recently renamed sport that changed its name in the US for two unrelated reasons. One is its "inventor's" public position in opposition to the rights of transgender men and women, while the other is a more practical one. What was this other reason, which posed a more tangible obstacle to its long-term prospects?

Answer: 1. Dieselpunk—much like steam was the fuel of choice in the Industrial Revolution, diesel fuelled the interbellum 20th century/ 2. Damage Control (DC) is a government agency that cleans up the mess left behind by superhero battles/ 3. Arabesque/ 4. The pistols used by Aaron Burr (founder) and Alexander Hamilton (benefactor) in their duel, in which the latter died/ 5. The *shahadah*, which says "*la ilaha illallah*", or "There is no God but Allah"/ 6. Bridal veil stinkhorn/ 7. The Valluvar statue in Kanyakumari. *Aram* (honour), *porul* (wealth) and inbam (love) are the three sections of the *Kural*, which has 133 chapters/ 8. The Sacred Band were pairs of lovers (lover and beloved)/ 9. The Marquess of Queensberry rules, used in boxing/ 10. Quidditch is a trademark owned by Warner Bros., and hence cannot be used in commercial enterprises.